

West Fork Road Public Meeting May 22, 2012

Facilitated by: Carbon County Commissioner John Prinkki and Greg Gifford of the Federal Highway Administration Western Federal Lands Highway Division. GIS Mapping by Tom Kohley.

Community Members Present: David and Nora Abager, Gordie Blevins, Ed and Bev Draper, Linda Mann, John and Shelly Link, Bob and Barb Shea, George Chopper, Jerry Williams, Linda and Larry Ennis, Mark Finken, Robert and Patricia Daniels, Pat Wagner-Thompson, Jack and Lavonne Ervin, William Foisy, Lonnie Turner, James and Mitzi Vorachek, Linda Fellows, Barb Beck, Howard and Karen Young, Jeff Schmidt, Kathy Benton, Joanne Blyton, David Munson, Steve Robbins, and Angela Newell.

Mr. Gifford presented an overview of the process. In 2005, approximately \$500,000 was earmarked for the preliminary work on this project. In 2011, this project ranked at the top of the list for Forest Highway Funds. These funds are part of the Federal Transportation Fund to increase access into National Forests. Montana State receives approximately \$10,000,000/year in Forest Highway Funds.

The proposed project includes the roadway between Highway 212 and the base of Ski Run Road. The road would be opened up to 30 feet wide; it would have two 11 foot driving lanes with 4 foot shoulders and a 60 foot right-of-way in most places. There are currently no anticipated significant changes to the route of the road; Carbon County is committed to purchase any additional right-of-way necessary for the project, so the design will try to stay within the existing right-of-way to keep the costs minimal. The early environmental document (a Categorical Exclusion) identified the ditch alignment as a historical feature and the shoulders of the road will either have to be reduced or the ditches piped in areas to keep the historical alignment intact. There are also a few irrigation ditch features, such as headgates, that need to be protected. This is an issue in the section where Wapiti Road meets the West Fork Road. In the initial design it is proposed to reduce the shoulders to 3 feet in this section, however piping the ditch to keep the shoulder width the same is also being considered.

At this time the design team is about 1/2 way through 30% design. They are working hard on the section where Wapiti meets the West Fork as the alignment of the rest of the road is straight forward, with the exception of the intersection with Highway 212. There are some plans to improve the wildlife pullout near the end of the construction section and to better define the intersection w/ Ski Run Road so that there is less confusion about the route.

Schedule:

End of July 2012 30% design completed; at this time ideas will be circulated and another public meeting will be scheduled.

February 2013 70% design completed; at this point most things are tied down and the county will be in the process of acquiring any necessary right of ways

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August 2013 design will be finished
February 2014 project will be advertised for bidding
Summer 2014 construction will begin

During construction there will be delays, but the County is looking into possible alternate routes to redirect traffic and minimize those delays. The County is talking to land owners about possible construction routes. The County is also trying to work with the Forest Service so that traffic can be rerouted between the bottom of Palisades Campground Road and Ski Run Road over what was formally "Close Road." If those routes can be secured it will allow the contractor to close significant portions of the road and reduce the total construction period. Any delays that cannot be avoided will be scheduled around high traffic times. The shorter the delays are the longer the construction period will be. The construction period is expected to last two seasons, May – October 2014, and may spill over into a portion of the following summer.

The meeting was opened up for questions.

Mitzi Vorachek expressed concerns about the beautification of the road; she is specifically concerned with the trees lining the road and "hates" the idea of piping the ditches.

Mr. Gifford noted that in past projects the Administration has entered into reimbursable agreements with the Forest Service to grow and plant trees disturbed in construction. They are making efforts to keep or replace vegetation along the road. There was a question as to whether a Montana contractor would do the re-vegetation. The Administration would not have any control over this as it would be contracted by the Forest Service.

There was a question if any provisions were being made for wildlife, specifically concerning wildlife crossings.

At this time the Administration has not defined any traditional wildlife crossings so no structures will be constructed to accommodate wildlife.

The audience was concerned about traffic speeds on the road and if anything was being done to address speeding including increased law enforcement patrols.

The speed limit will remain posted at 35mph. The Administration hopes that 11 foot driving lanes and the curvy route of the road will help keep speeds down. Increasing law enforcement patrols is dependent upon resources.

There was a question as to whether the turn, where Bannock Trail meets the West Fork Road, could be realigned to reduce the curve in the road. People have taken out mailboxes because they don't make the turn.

Mr. Gifford noted this concern and would consider it in the design.

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The average road width is currently between 20' & 22', it was originally 24' but shoulders have deteriorated.

Concerns were again expressed about piping the section of ditch around the intersection of Wapiti and the West Fork road.

John Prinkki assured her that all possible precautions will be taken to stay within the County right-of-way. If the ditch is piped, the piped section will be kept as short as possible. The Administration is still exploring if it is better to reduce the shoulder and keep the ditch open or to pipe the ditch and keep the shoulders at the 4 foot width.

Larry Enis asked what the long term effects of opening up Close Road as a construction detour would be.

Although this possibility is contingent upon Forest Service approval, the County plans to make slight improvements to the road to smooth it out and apply dust control, but there are no plans to make this a permanent road. Although this conversation is just starting, the County does not believe that the Forest Service would leave this road open after construction. During construction, the County would work with the Forest Service to keep pastured animals off the road by fencing them out or finding temporary pasture. The cost of diversion would be less than \$50,000. There is a small section of the Close Road that is over private property and the County is still researching to determine if there are easements for that section. Steve Marts, the owner of lot 2, has looked through paperwork at the Clerk and Records office and cannot find any documentation that easements were granted when the Close Road was established in 1895. There has been some discussion of trying to get a construction easement through Tipi Village and the County has started preliminary conversations with land owners north of the West Fork Road for possible construction detours.

It will be up to the Contractor to determine what section of the road will undergo construction first unless it is stipulated to in the contract. No section will be left unpaved over the winter.

After the December, 2011 public meeting the Beartooth Recreational Trails Association submitted a letter detailing their comments on the project. A gentleman from the Trails Association asked how their comments in that letter will be addressed. He requested the environmental document and Project Scoping documents be published to the Western Federal Lands website and that the letter is responded to.

Mr. Gifford has passed the letter on to the project design team and Environmental Specialist and will be taken into consideration. The Categorical Exclusion document that was created four years ago will have to go through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) approval process again if any changes are made to the scope of the project.

The audience asked how the frost heaves would be addressed in the section of road that goes through the spring.

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When the County worked on that section of road they discovered that they didn't go deep enough to prevent the frost heaves. This was partly due to lack of time and funding and partly due to the fact that the County had a good idea that the road would be undergoing construction in the future. All of these issues will be considered in the final design.

A member of the audience asked whether or not a bridge would be more suited to address this problem.

Because there is not one consistent source of water in that section, a bridge would not be suited to address the problem. After the County's construction in that section the design team has a better idea of how deep they will have to go to fill in drain material to prevent those frost heaves from disturbing the new road.

Unless detours are secured, construction will be one-way traffic with delays. The intersection with Highway 212 will also need to be addressed and finding a solution to that intersection will more than likely involve Carbon County, the City of Red Lodge, and Montana Department of Transportation. A round-a-bout has been suggested, but would require the purchase of right-of-way.

Barb Beck would like to relocate the road, and was disappointed that the option had not been [pursued](#).

Mike Pilatti, the Pilatti Trust, Canyon View LLC, and individual landowners would all have to be in agreement for any road relocation to be considered. The County is visiting with land owners to see if this is even a possibility. As Carbon County would never use eminent domain to secure this property, it would have to be a win-win situation for both the County and land owners. Part of the conversation will include temporary construction detours, if road cannot be relocated, to help expedite construction.