

Replacement for Missoula's Maclay Bridge in works, but years away

By [KIM BRIGGEMAN of the Missoulian](#) missoulian.com | Posted: Saturday, October 23, 2010 6:45 am | [1 Comment](#)

A plan to replace one-lane Maclay Bridge by extending South Avenue across the Bitterroot River is back on the burner.

Construction on the new county bridge west of Missoula is years away, and formal public input won't be sought for months. But the Montana Department of Transportation has initiated the design stage of a plan Missoula County developed in the 1990s and sent to the state a dozen years ago.

"It's been nominated for funding, and now it's kind of working its way around to coming to the top of the heap for funding eligibility," said Greg Robertson, the county's public works director.

Maclay Bridge connects North Avenue on the east with River Pines Road on the west. It's considered functionally obsolete by the Federal Highway Administration. Despite resurfacing and fortifying projects in the past, the bridge's sufficiency rating is steadily slipping, Robertson said.

The rating gauges a bridge on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being the equivalent of a new bridge.

"Under federal guidelines, when it hits a rating of 50 it's eligible for replacement," Robertson said. "(Maclay Bridge) has been below 50 for a very long time. The last sufficiency rating I looked at, I think it was at 32. When it's getting down that low, that's replacement time."

Still, the old span provides is a vital link to the Big Flat, O'Brien Creek and Blue Mountain areas. Other accesses are miles away, off U.S. Highway 93 to the south and across the Clark Fork River on the Kona Ranch Bridge to the north.

The proposed bridge would be built less than half a mile southwest of Maclay Bridge. The planned route angles from South Avenue to the northwest and across the Bitterroot River, intersecting River Pines Road where the road veers west from the river. It was the preferred alternative of a 1994 study commissioned by Missoula County.

Robertson said the county already owns the right of way on the west side and some on the east.

Engineers from MDT have already been on site developing a preliminary field report. Robertson said it could be a couple of months before the report is complete. It'll then be sent to county commissioners for public vetting.

"**This is an off-system bridge** that's in the very early stages of the process," MDT spokeswoman Lori Ryan said. "The department is involved in the engineering and the funding, and the scheduling will be determined by Missoula County."

Robertson said that's only partially true. Maclay Bridge is tabbed "off-system" because it's not on the state's designated highway system.

Thus it's owned and maintained by the county. But federal and state funds would be used to replace the bridge, and the county is beholden to the state's release schedule of "off-system" bridge money.

It's not unusual for such a bridge replacement to take 10 or more years from nomination to completion. A project the scope of a new bridge over the Bitterroot, said to rival the size of Kona Ranch Bridge, is certain to take longer, according to Robertson.

"Frankly, because it's crossing a natural stream, there's going to have to be a significant environmental process," he said. "There was some of that done in the 1990s, but I don't think it was finalized."

"The discussion on the environmental process is still in its infancy and no decision has been made yet regarding the type of environmental document that will be prepared for the project," Brian Hasselbach of the Federal Highway Administration in Helena wrote last week in an e-mail to Helen Orendain, an area resident.

Hasselbach said that, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the study could range from a categorical exclusion to an environmental assessment or even a full-blown environmental impact statement.

While a categorical exclusion requires no formal public comment periods or requirements to distribute the study document, Hasselbach wrote that federal and state agencies "are committed to ensuring that an adequate and robust public involvement and outreach campaign occurs on this project, regardless of the classification of the (NEPA) document."

Robertson said even if the county ultimately approves the plan, "it'll go sit on a shelf for a while and wait for funding to come around."

"I think if everything were done in an ideal world, bridge construction would happen seven to 10 years from now. It's still a long way off."

The issue is expected to be the main topic of discussion at a Target Range Homeowners Association meeting Wednesday night. Orendain said county commissioners were invited to the meeting to explain the process, but deferred until next spring.

"I think right now it's probably a little premature to be talking about it," Robertson said. "I don't know if it'll ever go or not, but I can pretty well guarantee you there isn't going to be any dust under the rug. It's going to be wide open to the public."

Whatever the outcome of the South Avenue bridge plan, he added, something must be done to address the deteriorating Maclay Bridge.

Closing it down without replacing it doesn't seem to be a viable alternative.

"All those things need to be revisited again," said Robertson. "That structure is close to 100 years old, and it's got some issues. We need to embrace that idea and figure out where to go from here."

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