



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS / ENGINEERING DIVISION

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E-2008-0170

February 27, 2008

Bike/Walk Alliance for Missoula
P.O. Box 8881
Missoula, Montana 59802-8881

Re: Russell & South 3rd Street West Project

Dear BWAM Board of Directors:

This letter is in response to your letter dated February 19th concerning the Russell and South 3rd Street West Project. As you know, the federally mandated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is still in draft form, so all information discussed here is preliminary in nature and is subject to change. This opening caveat is the key to affecting the outcome of the final EIS document currently planned to be published about one year from now.

The current draft EIS with a "Preferred Alternative" will be published in a few months. The draft EIS follows all the legal requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In addition to public support the EIS must take into account many other legal requirements. One of the primary NEPA requirements is the preservation of public park lands and potentially historically significant properties. This special class of public and private lands is called "4(f)" properties.

During the NEPA process the Preferred Alternative in the draft EIS must be the least impactful to the 4(f) properties of all the viable alternatives that meet the purpose and need for the project. It has been very clear to me that there is a locally supported alternative that includes features that are preferred by a majority of the public. However, that alternative may not legally be identified as the "Preferred Alternative" in the draft EIS if there is another alternative that is less impactful to 4(f) properties.

The public comment period and public hearing on the draft EIS will allow constructive input for the creation of the final EIS document. The final selection of a Preferred Alternative will not be made until comments on the draft EIS, and comments from the public hearing have been fully considered. City Public Works will work to advocate for an alternative that provides the highest level of safety and operational improvements, is superior for air and noise quality, is aesthetically pleasing, and actually may enhance neighborhood character while providing significant mobility improvements. I sincerely believe this is possible, and I relate it to my involvement with the reconstruction of Stephens Avenue.

BWAM

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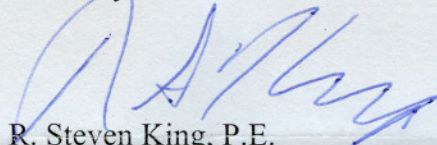
The existing road system on Russell and South 3rd Street West needs full reconstruction as soon as possible. The roads are dysfunctional for all modes of transportation. There are no bike lanes, complete sidewalks, ADA facilities, and the road is severally congested for much of the day. The EIS seriously considered and fully analyzed a three-lane Russell Street with roundabouts. The analysis shows that a three-lane road with roundabouts will continue to be congested for much of the day regardless of the intersection treatments. A three-lane road with roundabouts simply does not handle current traffic volumes on Russell Street.

Building a new road with inadequate capacity for both current and projected traffic is not a viable alternative. Russell Street north and south of the project area is accessed by existing multilane arterial connections. Reconstructing Russell as a three-lane road would create a bottleneck obstruction in the arterial grid system that I cannot support.

NEPA allows for review of changed conditions, including possible reduced traffic volumes in the future. The section of Russell between South 3rd Street West and Mount Avenue is planned for reconstruction about a decade from now. If traffic volumes on Russell show significant changes from what is presented in the EIS, then the conclusions of the EIS may be revisited.

The agencies working on the Russell and South 3rd Street West EIS will be hosting a public information meeting tentatively planned for April 2, 2008. The meeting will provide an opportunity to have the public informally review the project alternatives in advance of the more formal EIS public hearing. We will also discuss how public participation may be considered in light of the legal 4(f) requirements. I look forward to seeing the BWAM Board and supporters at the next public meeting.

Sincerely,



R. Steven King, P.E.
Public Works Director

RSK/cg

cc: Gregg Wood, Project Development Coordinator
Kevin Slovarp, City Engineer
Craig Genzlinger, FHWA
Miki Lloyd, MDT
Darryl James, HKM