

Project Description

The MDT proposes to reconstruct Highway 212 between Rockvale and Laurel. Increasing the capacity along this route is expected to reduce congestion and reduce the incidence and severity of accidents. The proposed project begins at Rockvale, Carbon County, and proceeds approximately 11.2 miles (18 km) to just south of Laurel, Yellowstone County. The study, public involvement and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are expected to take two years. The planning process will determine the most appropriate location, design and alternatives for the future reconstruction. Following is an update of work now in process.

PROJECT TEAM WORK COMPLETED SINCE 2ND PUBLIC MEETING

Scoping Report

The Scoping Report was comprised of three sections: 1) Comment Origin, 2) Comment Issues and 3) Comment Summary. A copy of the full Scoping Report is available for your viewing on the Website at <http://projects.ch2m.com/rockvale>.

Surveying/Mapping

The survey crew has staked the centerline of each alignment alternative. This work was done to allow the engineers to study the proposed location of each road in the field and consider making adjustments. Right of way requirements for each alternative will vary depending on the final design of the road and the amount of area needed to fit the road to the varying terrain. For planning purposes, MDT is studying a width of 260 feet. In most instances this is the maximum right of way that would be required if a 4-lane highway with a median were constructed. MDT prefers to evaluate alignments considering maximum requirements.



Staking

Crews are in the field.

You may have noticed folks traipsing around your fields and along the roads of your community these past few months. They are field crews collecting data for the EIS. Biological, cultural, visual, and hazardous material crews are in the field. More crews will show up periodically all summer. Please feel free to say, "Hi," or stop by to talk to them. They are eager to respond to your concerns relative to your land and will respect your decisions on access to your property. Oh, and by the way, we'll leave those gates as we found them!

Technical Analysis

• Cultural

Ethnoscience, Inc. is responsible for identifying cultural resources within each of the proposed road alternatives between Rockvale and Laurel. In June, Ethnoscience, Inc. completed a pedestrian survey along each of the alternatives. We are currently recording the historic structures that were identified within the project area. This includes contacting selected landowners regarding structures within the project area and conducting a chain of title search of the properties. Information obtained from the field research will be recorded on the appropriate Montana site forms and a technical report describing the results of these investigations will be written.

• Hazardous Waste/Materials

The hazardous waste/materials site assessment is completed by first obtaining a VISTA report which is a report that is compiled by searching all known databases such as those kept by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). The database search looks for Resource Conservation & Recovery Act (RCRA), Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation & Liability Act (CERCLA), National Priorities List (NPL) sites and for landfills, underground storage tanks and above ground storage tanks. Of course all items are not contained in the databases. For instance, underground heating oil tanks are not required to be reported. After receiving/reviewing the VISTA report the next steps require talking to someone on the local emergency response team to inquire about spills, speak to the local DEQ to get their input on spills and tanks to cross check the VISTA report, obtain aerial photos and walk/drive the potential alignments. When walking the alignments you look for discolored ground which may indicate a spill/leak, improper disposal of waste materials including old drums, batteries etc. and to look for unregistered

tanks (which may or may not be legal). We also speak with property owners to help determine what types of activities have taken place in the past.

Sandy Williams, Northwind Inc

• Biological

Preliminary surveys for wetlands, habitat classifications, and wildlife observations were completed along all alignment alternatives (and county connector roads) during the week of June 11-15, 2001. Aerial photographs were used for the initial identification of wetland and other wildlife habitat areas. Inspections were done on site for those areas with potential wetland status and for non-agricultural habitats. Most sites were accessed from current public rights-of-way or on private lands with written access permission. The landowners were contacted for all other areas where access was needed. Most potential wetlands were found along Alignment 3. These could be categorized as either remnant wetlands resulting from old oxbows of the Clark Fork of the Yellowstone River or as ditch wetlands from previous railroad and/or highway construction. Alignment 2 had the second greatest number of wetlands. Virtually all of these were the result of long-term irrigation canal leaks. Alignment 1 had the least number of wetlands that could be impacted by the alignment right-of-way. The only one of concern along Alignment 1 is a spring that feeds a large wetland which lies outside the right-of-way. Several species of birds were noted, particularly in wetlands with shrubs and trees. Agency information regarding other wildlife and important habitats in the project area have not yet been reviewed.

Field inspections of aquatic resources have not yet been conducted. However, a portion of lower Rock Creek would apparently be impacted by connecting Highway 310 to all of the new alignments.

Judy Ferguson, Scientist II, CH2MHILL
Chuck Blair, Senior Ecologist, CH2MHILL

• Engineering

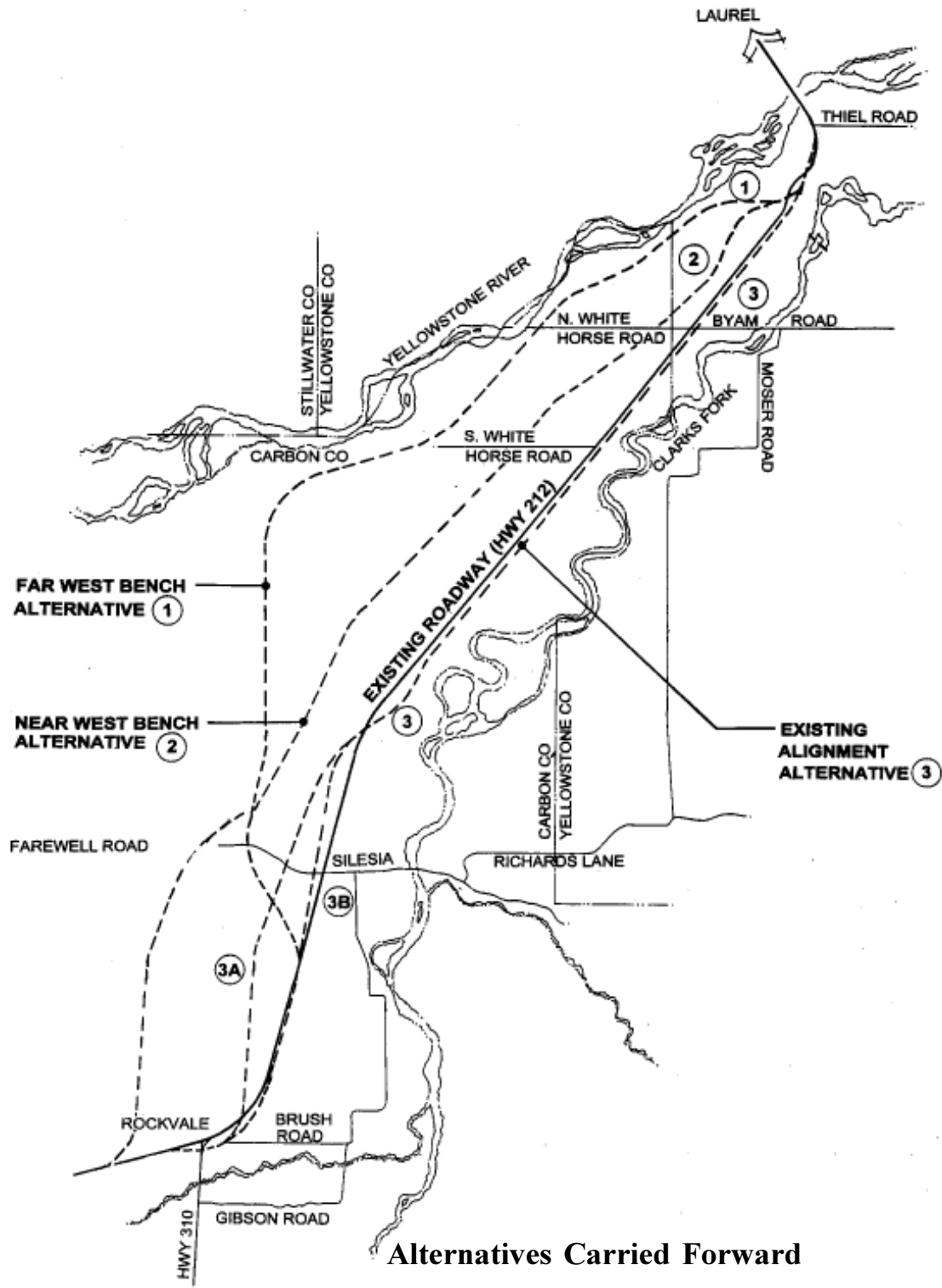
At the same time the alignments were being staked and reviewed in the field, more detailed surveys and maps were being prepared. The engineers will use these detailed surveys and the information they gleaned from reviewing the staked alignments to prepare more refined and detailed engineering proposals for each of the alignments. The more detailed proposals will be used by other team members to evaluate the social, fiscal and environmental impacts of each of the proposed alternatives. As examples, the biologist will be able to determine how many acres of wetlands will be affected by each proposal. The cultural resource specialist will determine if any historical or culturally significant sites will be altered by the new road construction.

• Visual

Fischer & Associates is responsible for evaluating the visual resource aspects of the project. Early in July, documenting the existing conditions with photographs and survey forms was performed. The inventory includes the existing highway as well as each of the proposed alignments. The Federal Highway Administration has an established methodology for preparing a visual resource assessment. Visual resource specialists are required to numerically rate the existing "views of the road" and "views from the road". A comparison of the existing visual quality rating to the proposed rating allows evaluators to anticipate change in visual quality. As part of the visual resource document, the evaluators develop a list of mitigation measures. Mitigation measures may include slope rounding, landscaping or revegetation, or recommendation on materials and colors for structures. Fischer & Associates will be preparing digital simulations of the alternatives after MDT provides information on the road cross sections under consideration. The findings will be presented in a technical report and summarized in the draft EIS.

Sandy Fischer, Fischer & Associates

Alternatives Carried Forward



Alternatives Carried Forward

This map illustrates routes currently being considered and evaluated. These will be explained in greater detail at the next public meeting, which will be scheduled this fall. Updated information can also be found on the Project Website at: <http://projects.ch2m.com/rockvale>.

FAQ's Frequently Asked Questions



Following is a list of questions asked the past couple of months and during the presentations at the 2nd public meeting. The responses represent Fischer & Associates' understanding based on the answers Bruce Barrett (MDT) provided at the public meeting.

Is running a new interstate over to Park City an option? *This is not an option for this project. The intent of this project is to improve safety and capacity of Highway 212. Your suggested alternative would be considered a new route. The planning horizon for this would be 10-15 years out.*

Has the number of lanes been determined? *Not yet, however width will be determined as part of this planning process.*

Will 260 feet be used as the road width? *260 feet is being used for planning purposes. This width represents a worse case scenario.*

How can you make a plan if you haven't decided between a 2-lane road or a 4-lane road? *Per Bruce Barrett, MDT - We are assuming the worse case scenario for planning purposes. The center of the road is critical to the alignment. The 260' represent the most right-of-way we may need. If this works for planning purposes, we know a narrower road will fit.*

Why do we need to change the existing roadway alignment? *There's not enough room to widen it. It's already too close to the railroad and homes.*

Is there Federal Funding for this roadway? *The EIS and engineering design were approved as part of this project. Construction will require additional funding. The current highway bill expires in three years. The Federal Government may authorize a new transportation bill at that time. Until a new bill is authorized, the level of future funding is not certain.*

Have you done any studies on reducing the traffic flow? For instance using public transportation? *We have looked at this throughout the state. In general we have concluded that this approach is not cost effective at this time.*

What will happen at the railroad overpass? *It will be grade separated as an underpass or overpass, depending on the road alternative and grades.*

When will the final say be determined? What has been the determining factor? *MDT makes the final decision considering impacts and costs associated with various alternatives. Please see the NEPA display describing the planning and decision making process.*

How do you establish the value for taking property (is that the same as condemnation?) *We prefer to negotiate and reach agreement with landowners. We will go through an appraisal process and negotiate with property owners to establish a value. A last resort would be using condemnation to take legal authority.*

Wouldn't it be cheaper to maintain one road than two roads. Why are you using EIS money for an EIS rather than maintaining the existing road? Why not just upgrade it? *There are too many safety and capacity restrictions associated with the existing road alignment. It would take up too much space and knock out too many existing structures and require modifications to the railroad to upgrade the route in the present location.*

Why can't the railroad be moved? *It can, but would cost one and one half million dollars per mile to do the grading and then another half million per mile for ballast, ties and rail.*

What is the cost of new construction? *\$1.25 million per mile for new construction is an average cost.*

How small a piece of property would MDT choose? This could leave a property owner with a useless tract of land. *MDT would review on a property by property basis, working with the affected landowner.*

If irrigation systems are taken out, is that taken into consideration? *Yes.*

How far from Rockvale will the new highway end? *A safe, functional intersection with 310 and merge back in with existing 212.*

Is speed and turning an issue? *The NHS has standards. The current road does not meet standards for a 2-lane road.*

Are acceleration lanes or railroad crossings a consideration? *Yes, both are. The Railroad wants on-grade crossings reduced to 3. There is a national effort to reduce school bus crossings at railroads.*

There aren't any school bus signs now. Will they be provided? *If there is a problem with sufficient sight distance, (houses, curves, vegetation, and hills) and the situation meets standards/warrants for signing, signs would be installed.*

If you have land for sale within any of the alternatives, what do you tell a prospective buyer? *You should disclose that there is a highway planning study and ask them to get current plans and information from MDT or Fischer & Associates.*

What are the Railroad's standards for right-of-way? *They prefer 150 feet from the edge of the rail to the edge of the highway.*

If we left the existing roadway and built one of the new alternatives, wouldn't we still have the same safety and traffic problems? *Not necessarily. The new highway would reduce through traffic and leave the old highway as a frontage road.*

Alternative #3 seems the shortest and straightest and most desirable. Do you see it as desirable? *Cooperating agencies met with MDT and FHWA . They did not like #3 as it has greater impacts on wetlands and biological resources.*

Will the new roadway include a bike path or bike lane? *This has not yet been determined. A number of people have sent comments addressing the high usage of this corridor by bicyclists and the need to provide for safe biking and riding. The engineers will be considering non-motorized connections when they develop alternative road sections.*

ALTERNATIVES TO BE CARRIED FORWARD HAVE BEEN CHOSEN BY MDT

MDT has selected three of the four proposed alignments to carry forward into detailed analysis. Alternative 4, the East Bench Alternative, has been dropped from further consideration. This alternative was dropped because of significant potential environmental impacts from crossing the river twice. Agency and public comments suggested that this alternative be dropped. Alternatives 1 (Far West Bench) and 2 (Near West Bench) have been modified based on public comment. Many local residents suggested that these alternatives remain on the bench further to the south and then drop down to Rockvale. This would affect fewer residences and have less impact to farm land. MDT has heard your concerns and directed CH2MHILL to explore modifications to those alternatives. New maps of the alternatives are being prepared and will be available soon on the Project Description and Alternatives page of the website - <http://projects.ch2m.com/rockvale>.



The second of a series of public meetings to discuss the proposed reconstruction of Highway 212 between Rockvale and Laurel was held on November 13th, 2000 at the West Elementary School in Laurel from 4:30 PM to 9:00 PM. The purpose of the meeting, hosted by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), was to update the public and solicit comments on preliminary alternative road locations. The meeting followed up on the August 30th, 2000 meeting whose purpose was to introduce the project, the planning and design team, and corridors under consideration. Attendees were asked to review displays and comment on four alternative alignments. The meeting format was an open house with informational displays from 4:30 to 8:30 and a presentation at 5:30 and 7:30 PM. Meeting advertisements were developed by the consultant and forwarded to MDT for placement. Press releases were sent to local newspapers, as well as television and radio stations.



THERE ARE STILL SEVERAL METHODS OF GETTING YOUR COMMENTS AND CONCERNS HEARD

- Attend public meetings - Comments recorded via survey, tape recording and computer input
- Comment through email at Hwystudy@mcn.net
- Fax Attn: Rockvale to Laurel Road Study - (406) 259-4963
- Letter Send to: Project Team @ Fischer & Associates • 2815 Montana Avenue • Billings MT 59101
MDT District Office • P.O. Box 20437 • Billings, MT 59104-4138
- Phone Project Team (406) 294-9142 or MDT District (406) 252-4138
- Visit the Website: <http://projects.ch2m.com/rockvale>

ROCKVALE TO LAUREL

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Hwy. 212 Study
c/o Fischer & Associates
2815 Montana Ave.
Billings, MT 59101