

Opponents Of 'Alternate Routes' Asked To Let Study Run Its Course

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By Tammy Gray-Searles

"First of all, let's not use the word 'bypass.' That's a negative word. Let's use the term 'alternative route,'" Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) Assistant Director of Statewide Planning James Zumpf said as he began an explanation of the difference between the statewide transportation planning framework and the Navajo County Regional Transportation Study.

Both plans contain an addition to State Route 77 that would route traffic around Holbrook rather than through it, depositing vehicles directly on to Interstate 40. They also contain a similar plan for State Route 87 at Winslow.

According to Zumpf, who gave the explanation during an open house on the statewide framework plan held in Flagstaff Nov. 12, the statewide framework plan and the Navajo County regional study are entirely unrelated, one having nothing to do with the other. He later noted that the Navajo County study, however, was included in the visioning process for the framework plan, resulting in the statewide plan bearing small yellow marks around each of the cities that signify "conceptual new roadways."

A number of Holbrook business owners attended the Flagstaff open house, and Zumpf was presented with petitions containing the signatures of more than 1,100 area residents opposed to any bypass or "alternate route" around Holbrook, regardless of which plan includes it. The petitions were circulated for one week prior to the open house, and called for other highway improvements such as an alternate rail crossing without bypassing the town, as well as the widening of Highways 377 and 77.

Winslow Mayor Robin Boyd noted that he was not able to attend the open house, but that the City of Winslow does have some concerns about the plan that he hopes to soon address.

District III Navajo County Supervisor J.R. DeSpain was in attendance at the open house, and explained that the county's intention for the regional plan was to have "a little study with traffic counts and alternates for new roads."

The statewide framework study is described as a "visioning process" to determine what transportation needs the state may have over the next 50 years. Several ADOT officials, including Zumpf, emphasized that the framework plan is not tied to any funding source and ideas in the plan are not constrained by financial concerns.

ADOT public information officer Laura Douglas explained that once all of the possible needs and ideas for transportation for the next 50 years are placed in the framework plan, a process will begin to narrow the list down to the most critical needs and identify funding sources. She noted that the 50-year framework process is called "Building a Quality Arizona (BQAZ)," and the process to narrow down and identify funding for projects that might actually take place is called "What Moves You Arizona." In essence, the "What Moves You Arizona" project is the creation of a long-range transportation plan that the department will use to identify projects to be filtered down into the five, 10 and 15-year planning cycles.

The BQAZ Web site, www.bqaz.gov, notes, "The long-range vision for our state is intended to be the foundation for future transportation investment decisions. It is through the State Long Range Transportation Plan and 5 Year Construction Program that envisioned improvements are assigned funding and eventually built."

Included in the statewide framework process is a vision of State Highways 87, 260, 277, 377 and 77, or the common "over the rim" route between Holbrook and Phoenix, becoming an "alternate Interstate 17" to move vehicles from Phoenix to Interstate 40. The vision also includes a new, unnamed interstate that would be constructed from Phoenix toward the northwest region of the state, similar to Highway 93, and connecting directly to Interstate 40.

The Navajo County Regional Transportation Study, according to Zumpf, is a step ahead of the statewide framework study by focusing on local traffic counts and needs.

"Most areas aren't this far along," he remarked.

Zumpf is the project manager both for the BQAZ project and the Navajo County regional study.

According to the regional study, by 2030 the amount of traffic entering Holbrook via State Routes 377 and 77 will exceed the capacity of Navajo Blvd. and Hopi Drive. It is unclear, however, how those estimates were created.

Zumpf noted that he believed they were obtained from the Northern Arizona Council of Governments (NACOG), the agency that gave input on behalf of Holbrook into the statewide framework plan, but NACOG representative Chris Fetzer stated that he believed NACOG obtained the numbers from ADOT. In the end, the two agreed that the numbers might have been obtained from the Department of Commerce.

Another ADOT official noted that citations for the population and traffic projections were included in the regional study. Zumpf had a copy of the study on hand, and a Holbrook business owner requested a copy of the study, but Zumpf declined to provide one, noting that it was "not for public consumption." The Tribune-News has filed a request under the Arizona public records law for a copy of the study. Under the public record law, any individual can request

and obtain public records, unless those records are specifically exempted from release under state law.

The study Zumpf had on hand during the open house included more information than the seven-page “Navajo County Transportation Plan Alternatives Analysis Descriptions and Preliminary Findings” document distributed to the Holbrook City Council and The Tribune-News in July.

The seven-page document offers up four possible “alignment alternatives,” each of which propose a direct connection between SR 77 and I-40, with three alternatives on the west side of town and one on the east. The document also includes three alternatives for routing traffic directly from SR 87 to I-40 in Winslow, and two alternates for roadways around Heber.

DeSpain noted that he is concerned about the effect an alternate route around Holbrook might have if built too soon, but also that if ADOT is determined to construct an Interstate 17 alternative, they may decide to extend the road through St. Johns to I-40 if Holbrook refuses to work with ADOT.

Zumpf guaranteed local business owners that there would be additional opportunities for input, both from citizens and government representatives, on the Navajo County regional plan, and that he would keep the citizens informed.

“We’re not bypassing, we’re looking at alternate routes,” he remarked. “We look at the potential and see if it’s needed, if there is a need, and if so, where it’s needed.”



Photo by Tammy Gray-Searles Holbrook area business owners and residents spoke with Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) officials regarding plans that include potential alternate routes around Holbrook during an open house on statewide transportation plans held Nov. 12 in Flagstaff. ADOT Director of Statewide Planning James Zumpf was presented with 1,100 signatures opposing any bypass of Holbrook. Zumpf noted that the plans were only conceptual, and asked area residents to allow the study to run through its process.

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