

WYDOT: 5 lanes in elk range

Agency rejects commissioners' plea for smaller highway upgrade from South Park Loop to Horse Creek.

WYDOT plans to widen Highway 89/191 to five lanes from South Park Loop Road to Horse Creek Road. The estimated \$70 million project will improve more than seven miles of road between South Park and Hoback Junction. MAP COURTESY WYOMING DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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August 26, 2009*

Despite requests for a smaller upgrade to a highway through elk country, Teton County will have a five-lane road from Horse Creek to South Park Loop, state transportation representatives said this week.

Engineers with the Wyoming Department of Transportation met with Teton County commissioners Monday to outline upgrade plans.

WYDOT representatives said local leaders' less invasive solution for reconstructing the road is impossible.

County commissioners had sought fewer lanes in some locations and other reductions in the size of the project, designed to improve more than seven miles of Highway 89/191 between Hoback Junction and the five-lane road at South Park Loop.

Among worries were that a larger road would result in more vehicle collisions with wildlife that winter in the area.

Hundreds of elk use critical winter range east of the highway and at the South Park Feedground to its west.

"We could build something like this, but it wouldn't function the way we want it to function," Pete Hallsten, WYDOT's resident engineer in Jackson said of county plans. "We'll be back in 10 years, having only gotten half the design life and half the service life."

In March, commissioners protested the state's plans. The board asked the agency to consider an alternative it submitted in August 2006.

That proposal called for a four-lane segment from South Park Loop to just north of Henry's Road. Then, the highway would widen to five lanes until just north of Horse Creek Road, where it would shrink to three lanes. The road would stay three lanes to Hoback Junction.

Instead, WYDOT selected an alternative that calls for five lanes. Shorter portions of the seven-mile segment are proposed to have four or three lanes.

WYDOT wants to reconstruct the road because it says the existing highway is unsafe, insufficient for handling the daily volume of traffic and too narrow. It also has steep grades, inadequate passing and turning lanes, and deficient bridges and culverts, the agency says.

District Engineer John Eddins said Monday that his agency evaluated the county's design and found that it would not solve problems.

One of the main issues is that the project is estimated to cost \$70 million. The state cannot afford the entire price tag, so the federal government is expected to help.

But the federal government would require that the road operate at a "level of service C" through 2026. The county's proposal would result in a level of service D.

"Level of service" is a term used to describe conditions on roadways. Level of service declines as delays and danger increase.

Hallsten said if WYDOT builds the county's alternative, there's a good chance the road will need reconstruction again in 10 years.

"We can't build something we know has a good chance of not meeting the design life," Hallsten said. "It would be irresponsible for us."

WYDOT outlined its main concerns – safety and travel demands – in a letter to commissioners last week.

Because the county's alternative proposes through lanes that transition to turn lanes and back to through lanes, drivers would have to "constantly maneuver" to stay in one lane, Hallsten said. That problem would worsen in snowy conditions when lane markings are less visible or when traveling at higher speeds.

Hallsten said drivers might find it difficult to know if they are in a "through" lane or a turn lane if markings are covered in snow.

Another problem is that with fewer lanes, drivers would have fewer opportunities to sort themselves, meaning faster vehicles could not separate themselves from slower ones.

The limited passing opportunities would likely result in people using turn lanes to pass.

"Passing would be worse than existing conditions, including impatient drivers [who would] attempt risky passing maneuvers that would create a potential head-on collision situation," the letter states.

Under the county plan, passing opportunities would be available in the southbound lanes for only 2.5 miles of the 7.5-mile highway. Going north, five of the 7.5 miles would allow passing.

"Therefore, the lane configuration favors northbound movement into Jackson, but the design would result in delays for the corresponding southbound movement," the letter states.

Commissioners said they still stand behind their alternative but are moving forward. WYDOT needs no county approval to reconstruct the road, so commissioners are now focused on how to best construct wildlife crossings and pathways.

"We still stand behind our original position," commissioner Andy Schwartz said. "But the pathways and wildlife crossings have to be right."

WYDOT has proposed building underpasses or overpasses to which wildlife are funneled through by 10- to 12-foot fences. Yet WYDOT could only construct those crossings where there is public land on both sides of the road. The letter says WYDOT will construct wildlife crossings where they will be most effective, including Game Creek, the bridge at South Park, Horse Creek and the bridge just north of Horse Creek.

Schwartz said commissioners may want more crossings and have the ability to work with private landowners to secure easements for those.

Commission Chairman Hank Phibbs said he's concerned about the portion of road near Game Creek, which has the highest mortality rates for wildlife being hit by vehicles.

"They're going to now have to cross five lanes of road," he said. "Our biggest concern is how to provide opportunities for wildlife to cross safely."