

April 23, 2020

Secretary of Transportation
US Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Secretary Chao;

We are residents of Billings County, 4th generation to live here as landowners and ranchers, and raising a 5th generation.

A bridge over the Little Missouri River would benefit more than just one industry or person.

From a taxpayer's standpoint, a bridge linking the eastern and western portions of the county would be an economical benefit. Currently, road crews must get the necessary equipment and materials from the east to the west in order to maintain roads and do snow removal. There is added travel, man-hours, and equipment wear and tear for road crews to make their way back and forth around the river until their work there is complete.

West river population has been questioned. However, we feel the current number of residents isn't the only factor to consider. The amount of traffic through the area due to people working on that side of the river as well as recreationists traveling the area all need to be taken into consideration. Also, when private lands begin to turn over, we may see the population shift again as new landowners may come in to ranch and live. We would have the opportunity with a bridge to get children to our schools in Fairfield and Medora.

Ranchers would have quicker and more reliable access to their property, grazing lands, and croplands.

Traffic on the roadways in the Badlands has been an expressed concern. People argue the bridge will bring more traffic. Yet at 100 to 200 vehicles per day on average, that amounts to 4-8 vehicles per hour. Is that really enough to ruin the enjoyment of the area? The study shows that there will not be a significant traffic impact with the access over the river. We are talking a few vehicles per hour, not a rush-hour traffic scenario. The traffic is already on the gravel roads, and a bridge could lessen the amount of traffic utilizing the roads to get around the river and through the Badlands. Fewer miles, less dust, fewer emissions...

There is a conflicting view on traffic being in the area of the Elkhorn Ranchlands. Some people don't want to see the extra traffic, yet many people are very interested in having better access to the area to be able to experience it. If you want to promote a National Park area, this bridge would be a benefit to recreationists and those wanting to enjoy it. Most recreationists/park visitors aren't prepared for the extensive drive up the west side of the river, and the shorter route up the east side means having to wade across the river, which they also usually are unprepared for.

Emergency services would probably have the most significant benefit. The two of us have a combined 45 years of service to the Billings County Rural Fire Protection District, and we have seen just about everything. Responding in the Badlands can be complicated and tedious – and oftentimes very stressful. And in a rural county in which one fire district covers the entire county, time matters. It may seem trivial to some people, but quicker response times to a fire can make all the difference on whether you stay there for one day or two weeks; quicker response time to a search and rescue means the difference between working in the light or in the dark. And in life and death situations, we all know time is of the essence. Some numbers to note:

- From Fairfield Fire Station, taking Blacktail Road, it is 23 miles to the river, which would take about 30-40 minutes.
- To continue on down East River Road to Medora, it is roughly 30 miles, another 40-50 minutes.
- From Medora to the west side of the river, going up to the area across from Blacktail Road, it is roughly 35 miles, taking 45-60 minutes.

From Fairfield Station, which would be the closest to get across the river to the NW part of the county, going around to I-94 takes at least 2 hours. Most often, this station heads west first to determine river crossing or incident location, and instead of backtracking to the highway, they head south on East River Road. Utilizing the highway and interstate shaves off little, and taking gravel increases travel time.

Response by each of our three stations has many variables – including available volunteers on any given day and their arrival times to their station, weather and road conditions, and the amount of equipment that can get on scene, which is directly related to how many volunteers are available. Each station is well equipped, yet it takes the cumulative efforts all three to tackle most of our calls. And nothing controls the fact that we can be on one incident and have to respond to another. Our resources have to be able to move quickly, and the river is a hindrance when we are on one side or the other.

The idea of placing a rural fire station in the west river country would be of little benefit to the fire district. There is no population of volunteers living there to man the station. Volunteers from elsewhere in the county would still have to get to the west side of the river to access the fire station. The hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment would hardly be accessible enough to be useful for incidents in the rest of the county, and equipment sitting on standby needs just as much maintenance. The building itself would require land, utilities, and water, maintenance, etc.

We are grateful and appreciative of mutual aid. However, mutual aid is what it is – help. We cannot expect our mutual aid neighbors to be our continual go-to initial response for incidents in our district. And mutual aid also depends on whether or not they are taking care of their own incidents at the time. And from

the west side, response times are not much quicker as they still have to get to the same roads we would.

The Billings County Sheriff's Department and EMS are in the same boat as the fire district when it comes to getting to the west side of the county. Most incidents are responded to by all of our emergency services.

The 1.2 million acres of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands – our “public lands” - consist of 4 grassland areas in ND and SD. However, the “public” can only provide 1 full-time law enforcement officer (which at this time there is only a part time person on staff) and two fire units. These resources are responsible for the entire 1.2 million acres in two states. It takes local people and local resources and the local governments to fill the void and provide the services needed for the protection and enforcement of these public lands.

We appreciate and love the landscape here. Three generations before us also did. But we also make a living in Billings County and raise our family here. And as residents, we are appreciative of the services our county has to offer. And as residents, we would appreciate our county being able to make decisions for itself rather being told how to do things. We are an agricultural county. We are an oil and gas county. We are a county that has tourism and recreational opportunity, and we support it. But we, like any other county, rely on our residents because they are the ones who serve on our local boards and are volunteers on our fire department and EMS, they work our local jobs, and they raise their families here. We cannot operate solely on being everyone else's playground, and the rest of the state should not expect us to.

The Little Missouri River Crossing is needed in Billings County, and we would hope the entities involved would be able to discuss, negotiate, and come to an agreement so that the bridge project can proceed.

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