



After the Bypass

As bypass inches toward completion, traffic patterns may influence growth

BY TRISTAN SCOTT // JUL 7, 2016 // LIKE I WAS SAYING, OPINION

Idling on the north end of Kalispell, I caught myself grumbling. Traffic was unbearable. Commuters and tourists inched forward under the heat and I told myself if I hit the next stoplight, I was going to lose it.

The average commute nationwide has been steadily rising in recent years, especially in larger metropolitan areas, where it increased 3 percent from 2009 to 2014 to 27.2 minutes each way, according to online real estate market Trulia. As a smaller population, we're lucky to have options, and city officials are considering their next steps to alleviate bottlenecks.

Elsewhere, that's not the case. In Seattle, where a population boom has contributed to gridlock, the city broke ground on a giant tunnel to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct. To undertake such a massive dig, a giant tunnel-boring machine named "Bertha" was built in 2013. It's been a relative nightmare ever since. Less than six months after the boring began, Bertha was damaged by a steel pipe and worked stopped for two years. The project, expected to be finished last year, has been pushed back to 2018. Critics have called it a waste of money, but there are few other options in a metropolis surrounded by water.

In the comparatively tiny Flathead, there's still a lot to think about. Discussions have mostly focused on how to navigate from the south to the north end of the valley. Soon, the entire length of the bypass (our own Bertha, without the

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delays and cost overruns) will be open from south of the city to West Reserve Drive, but how that will change traffic patterns, specifically through the heart of Kalispell, is still unknown.

Right now, city and state officials are studying what to do with the U.S. 93 couplet, where the highway through downtown is reduced to one lane on each side of the historic Flathead County Courthouse. The county wants to move both lanes to one side out of safety concerns. The state wants to expand the road to four lanes to move more vehicles, while still others want to limit the road to two lanes all through downtown.

We have options, but whatever officials decide could have a lasting impact. According to numbers compiled from the U.S. Census Bureau by WNYC, the average commute time in this area is just 18 minutes. But recent discussions are centered on more than how fast drivers are traveling. How should we funnel them?

Kalispell, with its plan to redevelop downtown and make it more walkable, has already begun positioning itself as more of a destination than a city with a highway cutting through its core. There is a visible bump in the number of people walking downtown. Alongside, traffic, population and number of visitors are also growing.

Residents who live directly east and west of downtown are concerned that reducing the number of lanes, and subsequently slowing down vehicles, could simply divert traffic through their neighborhoods. Opponents of widening the couplet to two lanes on each side say it could hamper efforts to make Main Street a calmer, more attractive city center.

The bypass, long thought to be a pipe dream, is about to come online. Instead of idling in traffic on the bustling north side, we'll soon have the option to go around it. A discussion on how the massive road circumventing Kalispell will change the city has only begun.

Soon, the city will break ground on a new rail park and, after that, replace downtown train tracks with a walking path. Downtown is changing. How traffic patterns change may determine how far it can go.

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