



**Item:** South Arterial Alignment Study - 2009

**From:** Mike Haynes, Planning & Community Development Department Director

**Initiated By:** Great Falls Planning Advisory Board

**Presented By:** Andrew Finch, Senior Transportation Planner, Planning & Community Development Department

**Action Requested:** Concur in the South Arterial Alignment Study conclusions and recommendations, and endorse moving to the next steps in the process

---

**Suggested Motion:**

1. Commissioner moves:

“I move that the Commission (concur/not concur) with the South Arterial Alignment Study conclusions and recommendations, and (endorse/not endorse) moving to the next steps in the process.”

2. Mayor calls for a second, discussion, inquiries from the public, and calls the vote.

---

**Planning Board Recommendation:** That the Commission concur with the South Arterial Alignment Study conclusions and recommendations, and endorse moving to the next steps in the process which include a financial analysis, formal environmental study and more detailed design.

**Background:** The Montana Department of Transportation, on behalf of and in cooperation with the members of the Great Falls Metropolitan Area Transportation Planning process, has completed a study to help narrow the multiple possible alignments for the proposed South Arterial, in order to streamline and reduce conflict during the environmental process. Local decision-makers are being asked to concur with the recommendations the Alignment Study contains to help guide the project development process and move the project to the next phase. Attached to this report as Attachment A is a 9-page Executive Summary that provides an overview of the Study, including its conclusions and recommended “next steps” in the arterial assessment and development process.

South Arterial Project History

The most recent push to develop an arterial around the southern end of Great Falls began in 1994 when both the City and Cascade County Commissions adopted resolutions supporting a process to solicit commitments to secure funds for arterial development and to gauge public support. In 2004, a Feasibility Study analyzed both a northern and a southern arterial route. The Study concluded it was feasible to continue pursuing the development of a southern arterial, but a northern arterial would not be feasible within the transportation planning horizon (which extended to 2025). The conclusions in the Feasibility Study were endorsed by the Great Falls City Commission; the Cascade County Commission; the Great Falls Development Authority; the Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce; the Great Falls International Airport Authority; and the Great Falls City-County Planning Board. And, those same organizations also recommended securing funds to proceed to the alignment identification phase, including the

environmental assessment and design phases. After securing a congressional earmark, the Montana Department of Transportation took the lead on an Alignment Study to begin the process to identify a preferred alignment.

A more complete history of the South Arterial project is attached as Attachment B to this report.

#### Alignment Study Participants and Purposes

The project management team, consisting of representatives from the City of Great Falls, Cascade County, Montana Department of Transportation, and Federal Highway Administration, refined thousands of possible alignments, produced by a specialized route optimization software, into six optimized alignments. The alignment with the fewest overall impacts and lowest cost was identified as the recommended alignment. If the project advances beyond this study, the recommended alignment must be reviewed under a National Environmental Policy Act/Montana Environmental Policy Act (NEPA/MEPA) process to ensure that the proposed roadway design would minimize impacts to the surrounding built and natural environments. This process would include a more detailed design and environmental impact analysis, as well as public input.

The stated primary purposes of the Study were to:

- Confirm the goals and objectives and develop a purpose and need statement for the South Arterial;
- Select a single or limited number of alignments for an arterial along the south edge of Great Falls;
- Identify sections with independent utility along the selected alignment;
- Identify the approximate recommended footprint for future build-out of the alignment including access points, lane configuration, and design speed; and,
- Identify areas along the alignment that may require mitigation due to impacts.

In addition, the Study summarized the Purpose and Need for the South Arterial itself, as follows:

“Purpose and Need: The purpose and need identified in this study are consistent with the goals, objectives, and policies set forth in the Great Falls Growth Policy and Great Falls Area Transportation Plan. It will be used as part of the overall project development process consistent with NEPA/MEPA.

Based on the information contained in previous studies and plans, as well as information gathered from the public and stakeholders, the following purpose statement was derived from the South Arterial Alignment Study: ***The purpose of the proposed project is to reduce congestion and improve safety on the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South corridor, improve street network mobility, and provide an additional Missouri River bridge crossing, south of 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South.***”

Additional benefits expected if the entire arterial is developed include:

- Improved air quality by reducing congestion and stopping and idling times;
- Improved international and regional trade corridors and reduced travel time between the area’s two military operations; and,
- Reduced emergency response times to and from the southwest Great Falls area and an additional emergency egress in case of disaster.”

#### Study Conclusions

The Study proposes the Red Alignment (Figure D in Attachment A, Executive Summary) as the recommended alignment, and that it be designed as an undivided four-lane rural principal arterial with limited access control, at-grade intersections including turn lanes and a 60 mile per hour design speed. As this project moves forward these recommendations may be adjusted to further reduce impacts. The arterial should have direct access from:

- Fox Farm Road
- Upper River Road

- 13<sup>th</sup> Street South
- 26<sup>th</sup> Street South
- 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South (US 87/89)

The Study goes on to recommend the Arterial be developed in phases, with the first phase between Fox Farm Road and 13<sup>th</sup> Street South as the “Initial Independent Segment.” The Study recommended taking the preferred alignment forward and initiating the development of the environmental document, utilizing the earmark that has been secured for the process. However, a financing package must be identified before the environmental document can be finally completed and approved by the Federal Highway Administration, and must therefore be part of the next phase, as well. Due to the high estimated costs (\$83-93 million for Phase I), the financial study is an important step.

**Concurrences:** A number of governmental bodies have also considered the Alignment Study, and have taken the following actions:

- On November 10, 2009, the Great Falls Planning Advisory Board concurred in the Study conclusions and recommendations, endorsed moving to the next steps in the process, and recommend the City Commission do the same.
- On November 18, 2009, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Great Falls Transportation Planning Process considered the Study. It concurred in the conclusions, but recommended moving to a financial analysis before moving forward with the environmental and detailed design process.
- On December 15, 2009, the Cascade County Planning Board considered the Study, but chose to take no action on it and forward it to the Cascade County Commission with no recommendation.
- On January 26, 2010, the Cascade County Commission considered the Alignment Study. It did not concur with the Study conclusions and recommendations, and did not endorse moving to the next phase.

The body that ultimately guides the Great Falls Transportation Planning Process is the Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC), on which Mayor Winters serves as the City Commission’s representative. The PCC will consider the Alignment Study conclusions and recommendations following City Commission action, and will determine future direction and action on the project.

**Fiscal Impact:** There would be no immediate fiscal impact to the City as a result of the requested action, as the existing federal earmark would pay for the next steps in the process. However, development of a South Arterial could best move forward with a combination of federal, local and private financial participation, both at the right-of-way acquisition and construction phases. Financial impact to the City of Great Falls would be discussed and better defined during the development of a financial plan, which would be the immediate “next step”. Recognizing the cost of construction of the recommended first phase is estimated to be \$83-93 million, City or other local participation could be substantial. At a minimum, a sustained local effort to obtain federal earmarks or other sources would be necessary, which would impact local ability to attract special federal appropriations for other local projects.

**Alternatives:** A number of possible alternative motions could be made by the Commission, in addition to outright concurrence in or rejection of the Study conclusions and recommendations. For example, one possible action would be for the Commission to recommend moving forward with a different preferred alignment, or moving forward with more than one alignment.

Attachments: A) South Arterial Alignment Study Executive Summary (Excerpted pages 1-9)  
 B) South Arterial History and Background