

I wanted to thank you for your support of our newly-formed Madison Valley Coalition and its first focus project, commercial “through” trucking in the Madison Valley. The purpose of this letter is to:

- 1) **Introduce the Madison Valley Coalition**
- 2) **Discuss the current state of the commercial trucking in the Madison Valley**
- 3) **Review the possible effects of increased truck traffic in the Madison Corridor**
- 4) **Provide the 5-Point commercial trucking proposal submitted to Governor Schweitzer**
- 5) **Ask you to ACT.** IF you support the facts and the proposal, we will need to ask you to follow-up by showing your support through emails and/or written letters NOW to specific persons and groups. WITHOUT this follow-up, the critical parties associated with these issues will not know or understand the importance or breadth of support that exists. The local, county, state and federal contacts **need to see your support.**

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## The Madison Valley Coalition

The Madison Valley Coalition is a non-partisan group of landowners, residents, businesses, working ranches and legal resources assembled to efficiently create, communicate and act upon important issues affecting the broader Madison Valley. On addition to working with local, county and state personnel, the Coalition has also assembled skilled resources and representation in Washington D.C. to provided expert access to Congressional leadership along with other federal government and industry agencies. The goal of the Coalition is to take a fact-based approach to understand issues, create a strategy and assemble the critical individuals and skills needed to both create a rational proposal and aggressively implement an effective solution

While the Madison Valley already has a number of very strong special-focus groups that deal with important areas such as the Madison River, ranchlands, etc., the concept of the Coalition is to be able to tackle important issues with professional resources that would not normally be addressed by these existing special-focus groups. Commercial trucking is a great example.

Ideally, the Coalition would be viewed as a tool, not an adversary, by government bodies and agencies. Simply put, the Coalition is an effective, “non-extremist” way for the broader Madison Valley community to have a collective voice that is professionally represented and supported with facts.

### Commercial, Through Trucking in the Madison Corridor

According to the MDT's own data that an approximate average of **635** commercial trucks currently pass through the Madison Valley each day. This number can go as high as 700-800. This information can be derived from MDT's network of electronic sensors on most highways that continuously measure all vehicle and commercial truck traffic.

The facts are clear. Most realize that commercial truck traffic through the Madison Valley has become critical. With all of the community meetings held by Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) with all of the charts and figures shown, it seems – whether intentionally or not - that the MDT was trying to convince everyone that there is no problem. Based on numerous meetings and conversations with the county, state (Jim Lynch and the Governor's Chief Policy Advisor, Hal Harper) and federal government bodies Baucus's, Tester's and Rehberg's team), I can tell you that they ALL know the situation is critical. It is just that no one has created or even proposed any solution.

Commercial trucks follow a fairly predictable route that goes to or from I-80 and I-15 to the south, through Island Park, along HW-87, HW-287, through Cameron, downtown Ennis, McAllister, Norris, and then, often through the Bear Trap on MT-84, in and out of Four Corners, and then quickly jumping onto I-90 to go north/northeast. Claims that the majority of these commercial trucks are simply making local deliveries simply cannot be supported by the facts or logic.

The presentations made by the MDT in Ennis seem to suggest that the commercial trucking situation is a "natural", simple progression that has occurred over time or that the trucking industry suddenly discovered a new, wonderful route. This is NOT the case. The increase in commercial trucking through the Madison Valley is based on a series of events and is NO SURPRISE to anyone in a position of responsibility.

First, a Congressional Act in 1990 declared that hazardous material (HAZMAT) trucking could no longer travel through Nation Parks, such as Yellowstone". This act meant that for commercial trucks carrying HAZMAT travel north or south through southwestern Montana would not be allowed on US-191 due to a 20 mile stretch that scraps along the park's northwest boarder. HAZMAT trucks now have to choose between I-15 and the Madison Corridor (HW 87, US-287 and often MT HW 84) route as a way to get to, or come in or out of Bozeman, Livingston, Billings and I-90 East. Today this is still the case. Almost all of the HAZMAT traffic traveling through southwestern Montana, in or out of the north/northeast, drives along critical watersheds that include the Henry's Fork of the Snake River in the south, the Madison River, the Gallatin River (off of MT 84) and all of the related tributaries. It doesn't take much to imagine the economic and environmental risk a spill would easily have in this region.

The second step occurred in June 2008 when US HW 191 was temporarily closed to commercial trucking for road improvements that included grade enhancements and other safety measures. US-191 is a federal highway on the National Highway Network. Along with Interstate 15, US-191 is one of two federally designated "PRIMARY" highways in southwestern Montana. US-191 is one of the county's newest border-to-border commercial truck routes, connecting Mexico and Canada. As a reference, from Interstate 80, Salt Lake City or Idaho Falls to the south to Bozeman, Livingston or Billings to the north, US-191 is simply the shortest and fastest route.

Both its construction and recent improvements were funded by the Federal Highway Administration. Prior to the closure on US-191, per MDT's 2005 Traffic Flow Report, given a choice between US-191 and the Madison Corridor, about **65% of commercial trucks travel through this section of southwestern Montana chose US-191**. About **35% of commercial trucks chose the Madison Corridor** and this 35% including all of the HAZMAT trucking between the two routes. Furthermore, as we all have seen, many of the commercial trucks traveling through the Madison Valley choose to "further cut the corner" by traveling between Norris and Four Corners on MT 84 through the Bear Trap. The percent of trucks on this section of MT 84 has increased from 3.4% in 2005 to over 15% today. We all know that this is the site of many accidents and fatalities made even scarier by the narrow roadway and proximity to rafters, fishermen and the Madison River. The most recent commercial trucking accident in this segment occurred on January 2.

The make all of this worse, of all of the possible north/south routes in this region, the Madison Corridor is the ONLY route with no permanent, regularly staffed weigh station to enforce truck weight, vehicle safety and driver logs. It's well known in the trucking industry that given a choice, commercial trucks will most often choose a route with no weigh station - most of the trucks, most of the hazardous waste and the only route with no weigh station, a real danger.

One might expect that once HW 191 is re-opened, it will be re-opened to through commercial trucking and that commercial trucking the trucking volumes will go down in the Madison Valley. During the town meeting held by MDT, they have stated several times that they don't believe that that's true. Also, in a recent article in the Bozeman Chronicle, Matt Collingwood, the MDT Engineering Project Manager on the HW-191 project (the person that should know), was asked by a MT citizen, Donald Smith:

***“Why hasn’t the highway department reopened the road to truck traffic? I live in Madison Valley and I’m over this dangerous situation your department has created. Has the Yellowstone Club put pressure on you to keep 191 closed to 18 wheelers”?***

Mr. Collingwood from the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) replied:

***...“MDT plans to revisit through truck traffic on this section of US 191 once all work on this project is completed. This work includes the chip seal to be placed next spring. At this time, we anticipate that to occur in the July / August 2010 timeframe”.***

In addition, we have been informed that the MDT has also reduced speed limits on HW 191, further discouraging through commercial truck traffic from that route and likely keeping them in the Madison Corridor.

### **Possible Outcomes of Increased Commercial Truck Traffic**

High numbers of commercial trucks traveling through the Madison Corridor – many carrying hazardous waste and with little enforcement – represents obvious risk. Truck accidents, fatalities, road damage, strained property values, the inevitable toxic spill and dangerous congestion in towns, are all eventual outcomes of the commercial trucking un-checked.

One solution to the commercial trucking problem entertained in 1994 and several times since then is a highway by-pass. Veering west just south of Cameron is MT State Route 249. This dirt road winds down the valley to the Varney and Blaine Spring Creek bridges then turns north and follows the west side of the Madison River until it joins MT HW 287 to either Virginia City to the west or Ennis to the north.

In 1994, the Madison County and MDT spent an estimated \$400,000-\$500,000 to develop plans and/or to studying replacing the Varney and Blaine Spring Creek bridges to full highway standards and building a highway by-pass that could cross the Madison River and take traffic down the west side of the river and join MT HW 287 just south of Ennis. These plans were detailed, showing bridge placement, the by-pass route (which would NOT follow the current Varney Road). When the community became aware of this in 1994, there were outcries which ultimately lead to the cancellation of the project and a great deal of wasted money spent on the planning by the state. Even so, we have been told that this plan has been considered since.

Recently, a community member was searching the internet and accidentally came across something that is suspicious. On Congressman Rehberg’s website was a Madison County request for funds (an earmark) asking for a \$10M High Priority Grant (HPP Grant) to replace the Varney and Blaine Spring Creek bridges and their “approaches” (see below).

**Madison County  
Varney and Blaine Springs Bridge Replacements  
\$10,000,000**

This project is for the replacement of the Varney and Blaine Springs Bridges located on Varney Road (Montana State Secondary Route 294) approximately five miles south of Ennis, Montana in Madison County. The Varney Bridge spans the Madison River and the Blaine Springs Bridge spans an overflow/side channel of the Madison River. The existing steel truss bridges were constructed in 1897 and are classified as Functionally Obsolete and in dire need of replacement.

**D. Full description of the project and how it would benefit Montana (500 words or less):**

The Varney and Blaine Springs bridges are located on Varney Road (Montana State Secondary Route 294) which serves as a connection between US Route 287 and Montana State Route 287. Both of these bridges are considered Functionally Obsolete and are eligible for replacement. The Varney Bridge is a two-span steel truss structure that was constructed in 1897. The bridge has a Sufficiency Rating of 16 and a structure rating of 3 based on the last inspection report completed by the Montana Department of Transportation in July of 2007. The bridge currently has a posted weight restriction of 5 Tons which limits all but passenger cars and trucks from crossing. The Blaine Springs Bridge is a single span steel truss structure that was also completed in 1897. The bridge has a Sufficiency Rating of 19.1 and a structure rating of 3 based on the July 2007 inspection report. This bridge has a posted weight restriction of 6 Tons.

As Varney Road and these two bridges serve as a connection between two highways, this route is considered a vital connection for emergency services in the area. Local fire departments, ambulance, sheriff, etc. used this route in the past as a quick connection from one side of the valley to the other. Utilizing this route could save upwards of 15 minutes in travel time for emergency responders which could be the difference between life and death in emergency situations. The bridges are now posted with weight restrictions which prohibit emergency responders such as fire trucks and ambulances from using this route which has increased response time in the area. This route also serves as a traffic bypass when one of the two highways is closed due to extreme weather. Typically the Montana Department of Transportation will use this traffic bypass every winter; the problem with this is the weight restrictions only allow for passenger cars and trucks, many larger vehicles are left stranded on the road until the highways open again.

The main rationale for the new bridge were 1) Route 249 needs to be a by-pass for HW-287, 2) the bridges need to support emergency vehicles reduce response times (this of course makes no sense if you consider where that medical facilities and emergency response equipment originate from) and, 3) the bridges are in a state of disrepair and need to be repaired or replaced. Certainly, point #3 is absolutely true (see below).



The Varney Bridge was built in 1897 and is quite unstable today and based on conversations the Coalition has had with the state's engineering team, it's likely that they must be replaced as opposed to being repaired. Furthermore, the Madison County, like most counties in the U.S., could really benefit from getting federal money for the project.

The problems with all of this are numerous. First, the way that this HPP Grants work is that it is attached to the pending Highway Bill. The current, new, Highway Bill is currently expected to be passed by Congress in the fall of 2010. When the Highway Bill passes, it is likely that the HPP Grant will be issued as an earmark. Once the state and county take this federal money, they are almost always required to build the bridge and/or roadway to federal standards. That would mean that the Varney and Blaine Spring Creek bridges would be a cement structure supporting all commercial trucks and speeds of 80 mph – a bridge similar to the new bridge in Ennis. The Varney/Blaine bridge will be Madison County’s own “bridge to nowhere”.

Another surprise was that based on input from the MDT and the state’s leading bridge engineering firm, Great West, replacements for the Varney and Blaine Spring Creek bridges should cost **\$2-3M, NOT \$10M requested** in the grant. Why is \$10M requested? Looking into this further, and with the support of Madison County, Great West Engineering provided a new estimate to replace these bridges. **This new estimate came in at \$3.6M.** So again, why is their currently an active HPP Grant request for \$10M?

It seems clear that individuals and most businesses in the community feel that building a new bridge and highway to relieve traffic on an existing adjacent highway just doesn’t make sense. The challenge is that as real as the commercial trucking problem is, no one has proposed any viable, practical, cost effective solution to-date.

### **The Madison Valley Coalition’s Proposal**

As mentioned at the start of this letter, we believe it is entirely accurate to say that the MDT and the Governor agree that commercial truck traffic in the Madison Valley is a problem. The issue is that nothing has been proposed to do anything about it except some increased Highway Patrol resources and an occasion temporary weigh station at Cameron which, even the MDT sees as not effective.

The Madison Valley Coalition looked at both the commercial trucking issue and invested hundreds of hours studying data, speaking with many experts and meeting with county, state, Montana’s Congressional leadership and representatives of the American Trucking Association. From these activities, the Coalition developed a logical, rational, fact-based 5-Point proposal of actions that, when working together at the same time, would **naturally re-distribute commercial trucking across all available routes**, reducing the selective pressure on the Madison Valley, or any other specific corridor while helping avoid other less desirable approaches to the problem such as new high-speed bridges and a new highway by-pass.

This proposal has been discussed with Jim Lynch at MDT, Hal Harper in the Governor's office and sent to Governor Schweitzer in a letter (attached) and includes the following recommendations:

1. **Re-open United States Highway 191 to commercial through trucking**
2. **Place into operation, and regularly staff, a permanent weigh station in the southern Madison Corridor.**
3. **Create vehicle and commercial truck restrictions (e.g. speed) in critical wildlife corridors in the Madison Valley**
4. **Close Montana Route 84 to through commercial trucking**
5. **Create, and begin the execution of a plan to move all HAZMAT traffic to Interstate 15**

Furthermore, we have told both the county and the state that we are aggressively opposed to a highway by-pass and we would like the replacement bridges to be "like" in design, steel trusses but designed to be two-way and support emergency vehicles while maintaining some of the historical integrity of the area. This will address the needs of the county while attempting to maintain the integrity of that region of the Madison Valley.

### **An Update**

After creating and presenting these recommendations to the county and the state, I would say that in words, they all believe that the proposal is logical and frankly hard to argue with. Having said that, after having a lengthy, positive and constructive conversation with Jim Lynch at the MDT to review the proposal in detail, he has since not communicated nor attended any follow-on meetings at the state capital. There has been no reply or comment from the Governor either directly or through any of his representatives.

The Coalition has also had meetings with the transportation staff for Senator Baucus, Senator Tester and Representative Rehberg in Washington D.C. and briefed the Montana state Senator and Representative Debby Barrett and Bob Wagner respectively, updating all of them on the situation and highlighting the discrepancy between the HPP Grant and the money needed for the bridges along with our opposition to a new highway by-pass. We have also met and spoken to the American trucking association, the Montana Carriers Association and the Montana representatives of the Federal Highway Administration.

Again, most of these people seem to believe that our proposal is rational. We believe that these Government bodies are simply trying to "weigh" the degree of public concern through feedback and support. **IT REALLY WILL BE UP TO YOU TO GET INVOLVED.**

Looking at each proposal:

- **Re-open United States Highway 191 to commercial through trucking** – The MDT and state say that they will re-open US-191 to through commercial trucking. They say that they will do this after chip-sealing and “soft shoulder” work (seeding) is completed. The Coalition has requested that the re-opening occur prior to the tourist season (we requested June 1) and certainly July 4th holiday. We do not know for sure IF or WHEN the MDT will re-open the roadway. Even if this occurs, because the MDT has also recently reduced the speed limit on US-191 significantly, this roadway’s re-opening alone will NOT relieve all of the commercial trucking pressure in the Madison Valley but it will definitely help.
- **Place into operation, and regularly staff, a permanent weigh station in the southern Madison Corridor** - The Governor's office and the MDT appear to support this item. Funding sources are being sought.
- **Create vehicle and commercial truck restrictions (e.g. speed) in critical wildlife corridors in the Madison Valley** - It appears that there is some support on this item. Based on jurisdictions, both the state and the county must support these changes. Speed limit reductions on US-191 took place very quickly. This can and should be done in the Madison Corridor also. Certain critical wildlife crossing areas exist on this route in the south as animals move in and out of Yellowstone and in the north. The Coalition is looking forward to working with expert organizations such as the Craighead Institute and Future West to create more details around this proposal.
- **Close Montana Route 84 to through commercial trucking** – It appears that this can be done by the state. Based on meetings with the Governor’s office, they appear to want to first restrict this route from HAZMAT commercial trucks. This is a good start but we need to get all commercial trucks off of this route. We would guess that the state would be worried about pressure from the trucking industry.
- **Create, and begin the execution of a plan to move all HAZMAT traffic to Interstate 15** – It seems as if the state believes that this is a good idea but no plan has been discussed. There is likely a way to do this but it may be a complex public process that will, at least, be opposed by the trucking industry.
- **The Varney and Blain Spring Creek Bridges** – At the request of the Madison Valley Coalition and under the leadership of Jim Hart at the county, Great West Engineering re-bid the bridges for \$3.6M NOT \$10M. The Coalition is now working with Montana’s Congressional leaders to look for funding assistance outside of the Highway Bill or to update the HPP Grant for \$10M that is still open. This doesn’t solve the problem however. There still is an issue to ensure that these bridges

are “like” in nature and not full-on high-speed highway bridges. The Coalition has informed Rep. Rehberg’s office to let them know that the \$10M is not required.

- **A Highway By-pass** – The Coalition has met with the transportation team for Tester, Baucus and Rehberg along with the county and state and let them know that the Coalition is squarely NOT in support of a highway by-pass. Per a recent meeting with the Governor’s office, there seems to be an agreement to publically declare that there will be no highway by-pass on the west-side of the Madison River.

### **Your Help and Involvement**

**IF** you support the recognition of the commercial trucking problem and **IF** you support the Madison Valley Coalition and some, or all, of its proposal, we need you to **ACT NOW**. A bunch of people have been working hard on this effort and it is likely **NOTHING WILL HAPPEN IF YOU DON’T ACT NOW**.

First, we want to know your thoughts. You can send emails and provide your comments and questions to [madisoncoalition@yahoo.com](mailto:madisoncoalition@yahoo.com).

Second, we need you to contact at least **THESE GROUPS**

- 1) City & County - The Madison County & Ennis
- 2) The State of Montana
- 3) Montana’s Federal Congressional leaders (Congressman and Senators)
- 4) The Federal Highway Administration

**The contact information is below.** We’d ask you to consider the following **KEY MESSAGES**

- 1) **Your support of the Madison Valley Coalition and its approach to problem-solving in the greater Madison Valley**
- 2) **Your recognition of how urgent the commercial trucking issue in the Madison Valley**
- 3) **Your support for the Madison Valley Coalition’s 5-Point Proposal or pick the elements you do support**
- 4) **Your support for the Varney/Blaine bridge replacement approach recommended by the Coalition - replace the Varney and Blaine bridges with “like” steel truss bridges able to support emergency vehicles - and your opposition to a highway by-pass.**

There are a number of ways for you to follow-up. One is to call. This is a good technique but not unless it's in conjunction with an email and/or a paper letter as a record of your point of view. The easiest way is to simply take the attached letter to the Governor and forward it to the county, state, local and federal contacts below. Most of the contacts have both email and physical addresses. When you send an email or letter, please copy the Madison Valley Coalition at [madisoncoalition@yahoo.com](mailto:madisoncoalition@yahoo.com) or the address at the foot of this letter. The contact information is as follows:

## 1) The Madison County & Ennis

- Commissioners General Email, [madco@madison.mt.gov](mailto:madco@madison.mt.gov)
- Jim Hart, [jhart@madison.mt.gov](mailto:jhart@madison.mt.gov)
- Planning, Charity Fetcher, [cfechter@madison.mt.gov](mailto:cfechter@madison.mt.gov)
- City of Ennis, Mayor, John Clark  
P.O. Box 147  
Ennis, Mt. 59729

## 2) The State of Montana

- Governor Brian Schweitzer, [BrianSchweitzer@mt.gov](mailto:BrianSchweitzer@mt.gov)  
State Capitol Room No. 204  
P.O. Box 200801  
Helena, MT 59620-0801
- Chief of Staff, Viv Hammill, [vhammill@mt.gov](mailto:vhammill@mt.gov)
- Chief Policy Advisor: Hal Harper, [hharper@mt.gov](mailto:hharper@mt.gov)
- Director MDT Jim Lynch, [jilynych@mt.gov](mailto:jilynych@mt.gov)  
Montana Dept. of Transportation  
P.O. ox 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001
- Montana Transportation Commission  
1764 East 1200 North  
Helena, MT 59620-1001
- State Representative Bob Wagner  
P.O. Box 191  
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# The Madison Valley Coalition

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- District Administrator - Jeff Ebert  
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Phone: 406.494.9600 | 800.261.6909

### 3) Congress / Federal

- Senator Tester  
Capitol One Center  
208 N. Montana Avenue #202  
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