DOWNTOWN WHITEFISH
HIGHWAY STUDY

For some, a bypass appears to be the "silver bullet" for the growing traffic congestion at Whitefish's core. Those who support a bypass believe this solution would reroute through traffic, therefore dramatically reducing the overall volume of vehicles and large trucks moving through downtown Whitefish. This perspective is certainly understandable. After all, nearby Kalispell recently completed a large portion of its bypass (Highway 93 Alternate Route) and this roadway is now widely used by through traffic and some truckers.

Bypass supporters wish to know why a bypass isn't currently being considered by Montana Department of Transportation and the City of Whitefish in the Downtown Whitefish Highway Study. Several past studies have addressed the bypass question. Let's take a look.

- Dating all the way back to **1994**, a bypass for Whitefish has been a point of discussion. During the original US 93 Somers to Whitefish environmental impact statement (EIS) five different bypass possibilities were studied. Ultimately, each option was eliminated. While conceptually interesting, actual modeling and traffic projections for each bypass option showed failure to divert enough traffic from Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street to justify the expense, environmental impact, and negative effects on residents in the proposed bypass areas. It was decided not to move forward with bypass planning.

Fast forward to **2010,** the City of Whitefish updates the Whitefish Transportation Plan. Based on public interest and with the intention of considering all possibilities, planners take a fresh look at a bypass for Whitefish. Four westerly bypasses (referred to as alternate routes in the plan) are modeled, taking into consideration not only current traffic, but projected traffic volume increases over the next 20 years. Interestingly, the results mirrored findings from 1994. While some of the bypass options helped somewhat to reduce traffic in downtown, none of them provided enough benefit to offset the drawbacks or cost. Some traffic would be removed from the downtown roads, but not enough to significantly reduce congestion. Each solution came with a huge price tag; and again, the environmental and neighborhood impacts would be very high. For these reasons, the bypass concept was found to be infeasible and not fundable. Instead, the work indicated that finding ways to improve the existing street grid is a more efficient and cost-effective approach.

I'm still not sure that answers why a bypass isn't on the table in 2020. Why are numbers from 10 years ago still relevant today or even 10 years from now?

- While no one can perfectly predict the future, traffic modeling is a useful tool to help evaluate how future growth and roadway changes may affect traffic. The standardized modeling processes for the studies conducted in Whitefish are tried and true, not only locally, but in communities across the nation. Additionally, new traffic counts are being added to prior data gathered. As a part of the Downtown Whitefish Highway Study, all types of transportation were counted in peak season. These numbers will serve to ensure Whitefish planners remain current and aware of future traffic needs.

- **Ultimately, all of these studies led to two conclusions:** Though some find it hard to believe, studies using the industry standard methods for traffic assessment have provided two conclusions repeatedly.
    - **Conclusion 1:** Without data showing a significant traffic reduction, a bypass project would not be implementable and would be financially infeasible.
    - **Conclusion 2:** All work that has been completed to date has shown that even if a bypass were to be built, there would still be a need for transportation improvements in the downtown.

Is there a point to trying to improve the downtown traffic issue if a bypass isn't feasible?

Yes! Past traffic studies have repeatedly pointed to the fact that there are numerous possibilities for improving flow, capacity, and access in downtown without trying to tackle a bypass. The Downtown Whitefish Highway Study is seeking to identify feasible solutions to improve traffic flow and safety for all users in Downtown Whitefish.

In addition, the study will assess if there are better ways to accommodate large trucks on the existing transportation system. Former studies have demonstrated that many residents and business owners feel that if large trucks could be routed outside of downtown, that the majority of traffic congestion would be resolved. Although this seems logical to anyone who has observed a large truck struggling to make a left hand turn in downtown Whitefish, a fair share of these large trucks must come downtown to serve local businesses. This, combined with the other traffic flow challenges, means that without strategic improvements to Highway 93 through downtown there will continue to be significant congestion and safety concerns for all users.

For more information about the Downtown Whitefish Highway Study
https://www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/downtownwhitefish