



**The Madras
PIONEER**

South Y plan gets approval

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By Holly Gill

It's a special pain that businesses on the north end of town have already been through. A handful of businesses on U.S. Highway 97 on the south end of Madras are already bracing themselves to endure a similar hardship.



Photo By Holly Gill

Andres Escalante, the owner of Mi Casa Restaurant, handles a crowd of customers passing through Madras on the Frontera del Norte bus line on Oct. 30. The planned South Y Project would cut off direct access to his business.

Following a three-hour open house Oct. 28 on the U.S. 97 South Y Project conducted by the Oregon Department of Transportation, as well as a review of information gathered at that event, the Madras City Council approved a preliminary plan for highway improvements south of J Street.

Under the proposal, northbound traffic on U.S. 97 veers to the east at L Street, through the area that now houses Juniper Ridge Floor Covering and Central Oregon Heating and Cooling. The highway then connects with South Adams Drive, which becomes one-way northbound from just north of Tracie Street.

In addition to the business center, owned by Carlson Properties, of Bend, a house on South Adams Drive will also be taken out. Neither property owner could be reached for comment.

Southbound traffic would remain relatively unchanged.

The project is necessary because the intersections of J Street and the north and southbound lanes of traffic are ranked among the top 10 percent of the worst crash sites in Oregon, "based on crash frequency, crash rate, and crash severity," the ODOT report stated.

Because the city considers it key to future growth, city officials have pushed to get the project included on the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan, the state's four-year transportation plan.

"We've spent \$200,000 on this so far to move it along and get it on the STIP," said City Administrator Mike Morgan. "We're doing this because we have a traffic congestion problem at J Street."

Morgan explained, "J Street is affecting the economy of Madras. It's an issue -- while none of us wants to deal with it, it doesn't go away."

Several business owners attended the City Council meeting to ask the council and ODOT to minimize the impacts on their businesses.

"I'm here to express my frustration with the whole process," said Dennis Prince, owner of Prince's Automotive, who was a vocal critic of the earlier plans. The new plan has less impact on his

business. "This thing is like breeding elephants -- a whole lot of interest and little movement."

The primary access to his business, which sits at the corner of northbound U.S. Highway 97 and J Street, will be off a frontage road.

"If we're going to do it, let's get it done," Prince said. "If you're going to shoot me in the head, let's get it over with."

Andres Escalante, who owns Mi Casa Restaurant, is also concerned about access, since his business serves as the bus stop for up to four buses a day in the Frontera del Norte line, which travels from Mexico to Washington.

Under the modified plan B, Escalante would lose the entire back parking lot, as well as direct access from the highway. Buses and other customers would only be able to reach his business from a frontage road on the west side.

Escalante and his wife Maria Melgorejo purchased the business and moved to Oregon from California in July 2007, with their three children.

Since then, he has spent \$60,000 remodeling the restaurant, which is not yet finished, and another \$80,000 to add a bar in the back -- El Descanso Bar -- which is currently open on Fridays and Saturdays.

Without direct access, Escalante is afraid his business will no longer accommodate buses. "For me, I'll have to find a different place because it's too short for the buses."

Currently, truck drivers park their rigs in the back lot and use his restaurant for meals, but that would no longer be possible.

"Truck drivers can't come in because it's too hard; there's no room to turn around," he said.

Allen Huang, owner of the Madras Truck Stop, is facing similar issues. "Construction affects business," he said, "even if they shut down one exit."

Huang pointed out that big trucks, which are typically 50 to 60 feet long, drive in, get fuel, and drive out the other end of the business. They don't back up.

If he loses the north access during construction, he said, "There's no way we will survive."

Pastor Rick Russell, of the Free Methodist Church on South Adams Drive, expressed concern about accessibility to his church.

"Most come from the north," he said, noting that attendees can see the church and drive toward it. "It's very intuitive to access."

Under the proposed plan, people heading south to the church would have to bypass the church, exit off Bard Lane, and double back to the church on South Adams Drive.

"What we want is intuitive access -- people see it and know how to get there," he said. "Keeping L Street (open) achieves that."

City councilors had reservations about plans that force semis and buses to turn right (north) from the Truck Stop and Mi Casa, and then turn on J Street to go back south.

"I want to see that we're not going to jam up J Street worse than it is now," said Councilor Walt Chamberlain.



Brad DeHart, of The Dalles, project and operations engineer for ODOT, said they will look at all intersections, and consider the type of traffic likely to use them before they come up with final plans.

The city unanimously approved a motion supporting the modified plan B, to allow ODOT to proceed with design of the project.

DeHart anticipates that it will take the team working on the project three to four months to finish the "Design Acceptance Phase."

"The Design Acceptance Phase is a term used by ODOT to signify that enough design work has been completed to establish solid construction cost estimates, right-of-way impacts, access solutions to affected properties, and environmental requirements, among other things," DeHart explained.

When that is complete, ODOT and the city of Madras will proceed with efforts to obtain funding to complete the design, prepare construction documents and acquire right of way for the project.

Once funding for the entire project is secured, DeHart expects that it will take another two years before the project gets under way.

Speaking as the former owner of Ahern's Grocery, which suffered during the North Y realignment, Mayor Jason Hale, asked ODOT to ensure that access to businesses is never cut off.

"It is so imperative that business access always remains open," he said.