

Bridge to Now

The history of Durango's most notorious traffic feature

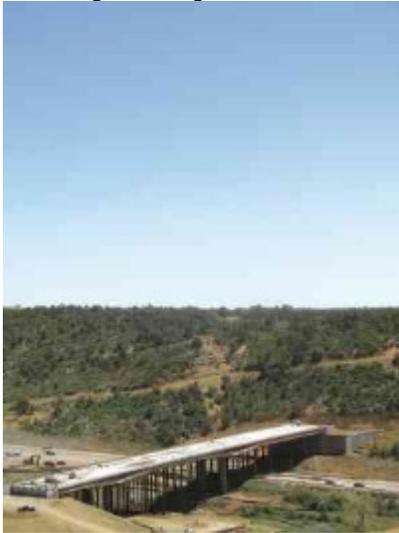
by Garrett Andrews

Herald Staff Writer

Article Last Updated; Sunday, May 17, 2009

It measures 59 feet wide, 530 feet long, squatting several stories above U.S. Highway 160 near milepoint 89.5. Stuck to its piers are 44 tons of asphalt overlay and 225 tons of steel reinforcements. In its infancy it was known as Bridge P-05-AG, but it goes by a different name today.

Click image to enlarge



Earlier this month, officials from the Colorado Department of Transportation said this much-disputed overpass, which residents have taken to calling the "Bridge to Nowhere," will be "fully-functional" by 2011.

When finished, it will have on- and off-ramps that will allow drivers to leave the highway and either connect with frontage roads, or get back on the highway. At some point, the \$6 million bridge may, or may not, connect with U.S. Highway 550.

And so sits the county's misunderstood giant, but few people may realize it is just one of three similar structures planned for Grandview. A second is planned for Three Springs Boulevard, and the third is planned for Elmore's Corner.

A legal challenge has stalled connecting the first bridge with Highway 550, but CDOT is resolute: The overpass still can serve the community and will fit with projected growth and traffic patterns if residents give the project enough time.

The master planning document for Grandview is part of a 20-year, \$455 million plan for improvements to U.S. 160 between Durango and Bayfield.

For now, commuters see a bridge that dead-ends in the side of Farmington Hill. Residents already concerned about how federal stimulus money is being spent have expressed outrage that \$4 million in stimulus money will go toward building ramps to the bridge. Property owners near the overpass said they just want construction finished so development in the area can proceed.

There is no dispute, however, that a needed improvement demanded by local residents for years has turned into a local curiosity, and that the road it took to get a better-functioning highway in Durango doesn't have a clear end in sight. A long roadThe Grandview project is part of a larger attempt at farsighted infrastructure development by local leaders. The city of Durango's 2004 Grandview Area Plan outlined a 20-year development plan for the ranchlands east of Durango, site of the 212,000-square foot Mercy Regional Medical Center, which opened in 2006. Local governments also anticipated the buildup of the 689-acre Southern Ute-owned Three Springs development area in Grandview.

The plan suggested preparations for the arrival of retail outlets, parks, path networks, an LPEA substation, three schools, and 5,467 housing units in Grandview. Kohl's, Target and other large-volume retailers sought sellers among the area's landowners.

In 2005, the city, La Plata County and consultants devised a Transportation Integrated Plan to outline a strategy for growth until 2030. The plan, dubbed TRIP, foretold a 75 percent population increase and focused on expanding and adding roads in La Plata County to help meet transportation needs.

A 232-page document detailing the highway improvements for the 16.2 mile-stretch of Highway 160 was approved by CDOT in 2006 and ground was broken in July 2008.

According to the family suing CDOT, the department was moving recklessly forward, ignoring red flags that signaled the first overpass could not be connected the way CDOT wanted.

The Webb RanchAt the top of Florida Mesa lies the 593-acre Marie J. Webb Ranch. It sits along stretches of both highways 550 and 160. Chris Webb, a Detroit attorney who grew up on the ranch, owns it with his sister Martha Coutinho.

Webb said CDOT began looking at his property in the mid-1990s as a possible realignment site for Highway 550. The move was intended to help cut out the dangerous Farmington Hill stretch of the highway, common to jackknifing trailers in the winter months because of steep and often icy conditions.

According to the Record of Decision that CDOT signed in October 2006, the realignment over the Webb property was the preferred route to realign Highway

550 because of its low environmental and agricultural impact. It also would add an additional Highway 160 access point. The decision was a culmination of years of public meetings and project designs, including an Environmental Impact Statement.

Part of the project included adding a long-awaited fourth lane for Highway 160 into Durango. Chris Webb and CDOT agreed that part of the Webb property would be used for this new lane. Uncontested at the time, condemnation proceedings for the fourth lane began.

The 2006 decision showed the preferred route for the highway realignment through the Webb property. Webb claims he only led CDOT to believe he supported the use of his property for the fourth-lane project. CDOT denies this.

Historic preservation In January 2008, Webb asked for the property to be included on the National Register of Historic Places. Dan Corson, with the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, said the distinction doesn't automatically stop a road project dead, but it is a common step property owners take to secure their land against condemnation actions, in which CDOT readily takes part.

Webb claims CDOT was reckless in pursuing the realignment across his land without considering its historic value.

"CDOT simply missed the historical designation of this ranch," said Webb's attorney Tom McNeill.

In July 2008, the same month CDOT broke ground on the bridge, Webb's consultant Douglas Loebig located 16 previously unidentified archaeological sites on the ranch. Nine were in the path of CDOT's preferred alignment. The next month, the Colorado Advisory Council on Historic Preservation sent a letter to CDOT declaring that it would intervene if construction began on Webb Ranch.

Deconstruction In the second week of August, Durango planning consultant Brett D'Spain, whose services Webb retained for his lawsuit, noticed structures going up. D'Spain snapped a few digital pictures of the bridge and e-mailed them to Webb, who later said he was surprised by the news.

On Aug. 15, one of Webb's attorneys sent CDOT a cease-and-desist letter demanding construction stop. In October, McNeill sent a letter to the Federal Highway Administration requesting the deconstruction of the bridge. In November, Webb alleged that CDOT engaged in fraud and bad faith, enticing him with the fourth-lane project and switching to the bridge after he agreed.

Lawyers now are in the discovery phase of the trial, gearing up for depositions.

The bridge today Construction of the fourth lane will begin in July and should wrap up in fall of 2010. In the plans are two more grade-separated interchanges (those that incorporate on-ramps and off-ramps, not traffic signals), to be

installed at Three Springs Boulevard and Elmore's Corner. Also coming is a slew of retaining walls, highway lighting, walkways and other improvements.

Region 5 director Richard Reynolds said CDOT and the Federal Highway Administration now are involved in a "re-evaluation process" to determine another alternate route for Highway 550, which could take as long as two years. A new Web site for the re-evaluation of the project - www.dot.state.co.us/us550at160 - was scheduled to go live this weekend.

In a news release CDOT put out Thursday, the bridge will be "fully functional" once completed in late 2011.

"The interchange may or may not include a connection with U.S. 550 in the future," read the release sent by Nancy Shanks, CDOT's spokeswoman in Durango.

In the meantime, U.S. Rep. John Salazar's office is looking to CDOT for answers.

A spokesman said Salazar's office received a letter from Webb's attorneys Friday and that the congressman is scheduling a meeting with the ranch owner and his attorneys. Webb said he will ask Salazar to alert the Government Accountability Office in Washington, D.C., of the issue.

A spokesman for U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet said the senator is monitoring the situation and "is concerned with how the situation has unfolded to date."

And not all residents resent the overpass.

Dwayne Findley is a former Montezuma County commissioner and current chairman of Region 5's Southwest Transportation Planning Region, an intergovernmental organization comprised of local government and tribal representatives, charged with regularly prioritizing transportation projects for the region.

Transportation planning regions are not responsible for assessing rights of way, engineering or other issues involving project specifics.

Findley said he and other local leaders were unaware that CDOT hadn't acquired the property rights needed for its desired alignment when CDOT briefed the board on the project in 2006.

He said La Plata County residents still should count their blessings.

"Some people are saying it's a boondoggle; it's a bridge to nowhere," he said. "If that money wasn't spent there, perhaps it would have gone away."

"We're trying to look into crystal balls and imagine what transportation will be like in 2030 and how we should best accommodate those needs. It's not an exact science."

Rowean Crader owns the 240-acre South Fork Ranch on the north side of 160, in sight of the bridge. She was involved in the original discussions with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and was courted by Target for the location of a Durango outlet. She said she always has been treated fairly by CDOT but has stopped looking forward to development in Grandview.

After nearly a decade of public meetings and interchange plans that never materialized, she said the new plan to tie off the bridge to frontage roads is something of a relief.

"Now we're sitting here just happy as can be. Whatever happens, happens."

gandrews@durangoherald.com