Moab City Council Agenda Item
Meeting Date: March 23, 2021

Item: City of Moab Resolution No. 08-2021 - A Resolution Stating the City of Moab’s Position on Highway 191 Bypass Alignment(s), and Support for Pursuing Alternate Tools for Downtown Main Street Traffic Mitigation

Staff/Council Presenters: Kalen Jones, Councilmember; Joel Linares, City Manager

Attachment(s):
- Attachment 1: Resolution No. 08-2021

Proposed Motion: “I move to approve Resolution No. 08-2021 - A Resolution Stating the City of Moab’s Position on Highway 191 Bypass Alignment(s), and Support for Pursuing Alternate Tools for Downtown Main Street Traffic Mitigation.”

Background:

The idea of a Highway 191 “bypass” has been raised on and off for decades in Moab as a means to allow trucks and other vehicles to go around the downtown area to alleviate traffic congestion on Main Street in downtown Moab. Below is a brief recap of where we are:

In 2004, the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) conducted a feasibility study during the Colorado River Bridge Replacement project. Several alternatives were considered. One alternative considered a combination of two bridges: one for northbound traffic at the existing spot by what’s now Lions Park, and another for southbound traffic crossing the river between the Potash Road (Hwy 279) and Kane Creek Road. Another alternative considered having only one bridge from Hwy 279 to Kane Creek Road. Both of these options were rejected at the time, and it was noted in the 2004 Environmental Assessment that the bridge from the Potash Road to Kane Creek might be considered in the future as a separate project for an additional bypass to divert trucks off of Main Street.

The bypass issue was raised again in 2018 when state funding became available for recreational communities to study and implement congestion mitigation, locally known as Arches Hotspot Funding. One of the items that was studied was the option of a bypass via UDOT consultants Fehr & Peers’ 2018 “UDOT Main Street (US-191) Moab Bypass Planning Study” (the Study). This Study identified 11 bypass alternatives, narrowed those 11 down to two alignment options labeled Alternatives “1A” and “1D,” both of which would have significant negative impacts to westside City neighborhoods.

Upon release of these two preferred alternative routes, 1A and 1D, residents who would be most impacted by them overwhelmingly expressed opposition to these routes to elected officials. On several occasions, the majority of the City Council, the prior Grand County “Council,” and most recently the Grand County “Commission,” have publicly expressed that there is no interest in a bypass route that will negatively impact any Moab neighborhoods. To date, though, no formal action has been taken that establishes that as the City’s position.

Recently, UDOT, the City of Moab, Grand and San Juan Counties, and SITLA have funded a Southeastern Utah Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) (also referred to as the Moab & Spanish Valley RTP) to document short, medium, and long-range projects for inclusion in UDOT’s long-range transportation funding plans. UDOT is the lead agency on the project, with Fehr & Peers as their consultant. The RTP is currently in near final form. During the plan drafting process, UDOT, Fehr & Peers, and regional stakeholders identified many potential projects, including a “Moab bypass” with
references to the 2018 Study mentioned above. Several participants in the planning process, including City and County elected officials, expressed that the bypass alternatives favored by the 2018 Study, and raised in the RTP process, were not acceptable.

However, UDOT consultant Fehr & Peers strongly recommended leaving the bypass in the RTP, even though UDOT and its consultants have previously stated that if the community did not want the bypass on the RTP project list, it would not be on that list. UDOT also stated that even if a project is not on the RTP project list, it could be added at any time. It should also be noted that in the latest draft RTP it states: "the recommendation of this plan is to include the notion of a bypass in this plan without a specific alignment or timeframe. This makes no commitment for any agency to take action on it but leaves the decision to take a more comprehensive analysis open as an option that UDOT leadership and/or local elected bodies can initiate." In other words, as long as the bypass remains in the RTP, it can be initiated with or without the support of local elected bodies. It should also be noted that the idea of a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process (i.e., development of an environmental impact statement) is also still included in the RTP, even though there is no specific alignment identified that would require an environmental study.

The reality is that no other viable options exist in Grand County for a proposed bypass route other than the two alignments identified in the 2018 Study: 1A and 1D. If other options existed that UDOT was willing to fund, they would have been raised, advanced and studied. The idea of a tunnel under Main Street or through Behind the Rocks is simply not financially viable at this time. If the support and funding for these alternatives – or similar alternatives that do not impact neighborhoods – arise in the future, such alternatives could be considered in a comprehensive analysis at that time.

Resolution No. 08-2021 provides a thorough documentation of the reasons an above-ground bypass or an additional highway through Moab is not an option the Council is willing to pursue. While we recognize that traffic and congestion do have real impacts along Main Street, relocating some of those impacts to populated, residential areas of the community is not acceptable. The continuing idea of a bypass – and the contention around it – also distracts from the hard work of finding real solutions to Moab’s challenges. Resolution No. 08-2021 identifies the idea of directing the City Council and City staff’s focus on redevelopment options for downtown Moab, instead of focusing on the bypass. It will formally provide the City’s position on a bypass, allowing Council and staff to pursue a more practical option of improving downtown for both the residents and visitors.