

# EFFORT TO SECURE BYPASS FUNDING DESERVES PRAISE

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Among the top stories of the week was the good news that Kalispell is getting a \$12.75 million federal grant to convert roughly 2 miles of the southern half of the U.S. 93 bypass into a four-lane highway.

The money will pay not only for the extra highway lanes but also the removal of the Foy's Lake roundabout and addition of an interchange at that junction.

Congratulations go to a number of key players who went the distance to secure the federal funds for the bypass expansion.

State highway officials, city and county leaders, economic development leaders and Montana's U.S. senators collaborated in vying for the BUILD — Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development — grant, a program that replaced the old TIGER grant program that funneled \$10 million into the construction of the Glacier Rail Park.

As Montana Department of Transportation Missoula District Administrator Ed Toavs told the Inter Lake, "It was just another partnership that worked out well."

Yes, his assessment of collaboration is quite correct, but he may be a little too modest. It was Toavs who met with local officials early on to encourage them to explore the federal grant program. He saw this shovel-ready project as a perfect candidate for the funding, and he was right.

We can't help but think Toavs' exhaustive economic analysis of the bypass gave the federal folks some pretty impressive statistics as they considered grant applications from all over the country. Toavs completed the analysis for his master's degree in business administration, showing that from 2001 to 2016 the bypass had a total economic impact of \$1.21 billion. He also took the lead in drafting the benefit-cost analysis that accompanied the grant application, and recently co-authored a 2018 update of the economic impact of the bypass.

These analyses show the bypass is good for business in Flathead County. The project creates an average of 834 jobs annually and \$29 million in total annual compensation. Motorists can see for themselves the flurry of residential and commercial growth that already has been built along the bypass. Beyond the economic impact, the average annual tax impact to state and local coffers from the bypass is roughly \$5.4 million in property, excise and income taxes.

Plans are already in the works to figure out the funding for converting the southern-most section of the bypass to four lanes, and the eventual removal of the Airport Road roundabout. A consultant is already on board to scope that work.

For decades it seemed a bypass was beyond reach for Kalispell, but thanks to the tenacity of all of the stakeholders we can now see the light at the end of that four-lane tunnel, and we can't wait to have the bypass fully completed.

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