

A Brief History of the North Fork Road

By Molly Shepherd

In days gone by, would-be heroes were tested by ordeals meant to prove their mettle. Successive generations of North Fork landowners likewise have been challenged by their own rite of passage, the North Fork Road.

- In the homestead era, the “road” was a track through the wilderness, better suited to horses than motor vehicles and traveled only when necessary. Slides and rock showers made Fool Hen, the unstable hill north of Canyon Creek, especially treacherous.
- Despite U.S. Forest Service engineering improvements, the road was still a mostly one-lane affair in the 1960s and early ‘70s. North Forkers drove to town as infrequently as possible, preferring to buy supplies at the Polebridge store. There was so little traffic that you could bump along with your windows down. Loaded log trucks were the principal hazard and some encounters did not end well.
- Talk about paving the road began in earnest in the late 1970s. A proposal to pave the nine-mile stretch from Canyon Creek to Camas Creek died in 1980 when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service issued its opinion that the proposed improvement was likely to jeopardize the gray wolf and the grizzly bear.
- In 1985, as a prelude to land-use planning, a survey of North Fork landowners was conducted. Of those responding to the survey, 77.1 percent agreed with the proposition that “[d]ust control and general maintenance of N.F. road must be provided and the county should work with landowners to develop short-term and long-term objectives.”
- Landowners who drafted the 1986 North Fork Land Use Plan listed road improvement and paving as a concern. They also established a precedent by declining to address the issue. In their words, “[r]oads ... are such a volatile and controversial subject on the North Fork that, if included, no semblance of consensus would be possible.”
- In 1987, the Canyon Creek to Camas Creek section of the road was improved and graveled at a cost of \$4.3 million. The section is designated a federal secondary route, qualifying for receipt of federal highway construction funds.
- Road usage increased in the 1990s, hardening the positions of the pro- and anti-paving factions. In 1999, at the request of county officials, Congress appropriated \$2.4 million to pave the Canyon-to-Camas section. The appropriation was insufficient to cover construction costs, much less an environmental review and other incidental expenses. The money was spent elsewhere. Meanwhile, a North Fork Preservation Association petition opposing paving the road garnered over 1,000 signatures.
- In 2000, in conjunction with a land-use survey, 61.3 percent of North Fork landowners who responded favored paving from Canyon to Camas; 45 percent favored paving from Camas to Polebridge; 27.4 percent favored paving from

Polebridge to the Canadian border. Notably, 80 percent of landowners have property north of Polebridge.

- Historically, the debate among North Fork landowners has focused on whether to pave the road. **Colleen Lux, the author of a 2002 survey** intended to gauge landowners' opinion on all maintenance alternatives, found that many North Forkers still saw the issue as a "pave-or-not-pave" proposition. She also found the community polarized, with those who strongly supported or strongly opposed paving the road far outnumbering those who merely supported or opposed paving.
- The North Fork Landowners' Association (formerly the North Fork Improvement Association) conducted another road survey in 2006. Sixty-one percent of landowners responded: 55.6 percent supported paving to Camas Creek. The numbers were reversed when the question pertained to paving other sections of the road. Of those responding, however, 76.2 percent supported dust abatement, however.
- Also in 2006, a group of North Fork landowners established the North Fork Road Coalition for Health and Safety. The coalition has tried to shift the focus of the debate from paving to dust pollution caused by increased traffic on the road. In 2007, the coalition contracted with the University of Montana Center for Environmental Health Sciences to study air samples collected at selected points along the road. The author of the study, which was issued in 2008, confirmed the need for additional resources from Flathead County and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to determine the true extent of the dust problem and then to mitigate it as necessary.
- In the winter of 2007-2008, Shannon Donahue was commissioned by the North Fork Preservation Association to do a study titled "**A Review of the Direct and Indirect Effects of Paving Flathead County Road 486, the North Fork Road.**" (*Loads slowly.*)
- The 2008 **North Fork Neighborhood Plan** acknowledges the importance of the issues raised in the ongoing debate about the road. But in order to avoid disrupting the planning process or jeopardizing existing zoning regulations, the plan does not address resolution of the debate. Instead it calls for "[w]ork within the North Fork Community, and with local, state and federal agencies, to find solutions to reduce dust pollutants originating from the North Fork Road."

The North Fork Road both defines and divides North Fork landowners. We confront the road with 10-ply tires, chains and a special relationship with Les Schwab in Columbia Falls. We confront one another with arguments based on the disparate values implicated in the road debate—human health, safety and convenience, wildlife habitat, pressure on protected species, economic development, limiting growth, increased recreational access, air and water quality, aesthetics and preserving a fragile way of life.

Molly Shepherd is a longtime North Fork landowner and president of the North Fork Landowners' Association.

We have more history of the North Fork Road, by:

John Frederick, founder of the North Fork Preservation Association;

Bob Grimaldi, co-founder of the North Fork Road Coalition for Health and Safety;
Larry Wilson, Hungry Horse News columnist.