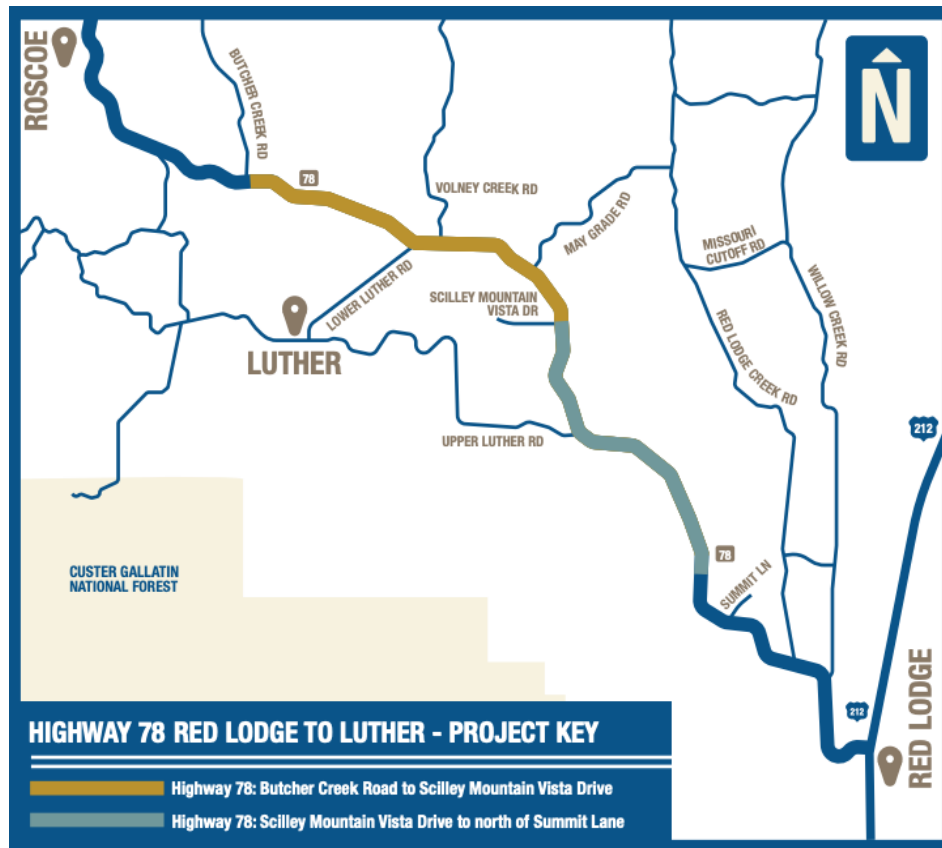


Highway 78 – Red Lodge to Luther Frequently Asked Questions



What is the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) planning for MT Highway 78 near Red Lodge?

- MDT is planning the “Highway 78 – Red Lodge to Luther” projects. These are two adjacent projects.
- Both projects are in the design phase meaning that some aspects could shift depending on public input.
- Plans aim to accomplish the following:
 - Improve safety by increasing sight distance, allowing drivers to see further beyond curves and hills.
 - Flatten steep grades, reducing the “roller-coaster” effect experienced when traveling over hills.
 - Widen shoulders on both sides of the roadway to four feet.
 - Add additional vehicle turnouts.
 - Replace the bridge crossing at Lower Luther Road where West Red Lodge Creek flows underneath the highway.

Where do these projects start and end?

- The eastern project starts roughly five miles northwest of Red Lodge past Summit Lane and ends at Scilley Mountain Vista Drive. The western project begins at Scilley Mountain Vista Drive and ends near Butcher Creek Road.
- 10.6 miles of roadway will be improved.

Why is this work happening?

- MDT wants to redesign Highway 78 to reduce crashes and provide drivers with better opportunities to make safe driving decisions.
- Highway 78 has numerous areas where hills and valleys are steep. Drivers currently have limited sight-distance and limited time to react to any obstacles.
- The crash rate of this corridor is 65% higher than the statewide average.
- A corridor study performed in 2008 found that 51 of 55 passing areas do not meet the current minimum passing sight-distance requirement.
 - Drivers currently have difficulty seeing beyond the roadway hills and have to make quick decisions when passing on this two-lane highway. Project improvements would allow drivers to more safely and confidently pass a slow vehicle or react to an animal crossing the road.

When will construction begin on these projects?

- Construction could begin as soon as 2026.
 - Work would begin as two separate projects, joining near Scillely Mountain Vista Drive.
- Because both projects are still in the design phase, construction plans are not final.

Why can't construction start sooner?

- MDT cares deeply about ensuring the community has enough information to be well informed and provide input on project plans.
- The design phase of the project process is an integral part of roadway development that requires a great deal of research, assessment of surrounding terrain, and construction feasibility studies.
- MDT is committed to ensuring environmental impacts are kept to a minimum, so this stage involves carefully assessing how the surrounding life and land is affected and securing the appropriate permits.
- This rigorous process takes time and it would be dangerous to hastily move forward with a solution only to save time.
- Design phase planning also includes working with landowners to obtain right-of-way, coordinating with local government agencies, and securing federal funding, which often covers 80-90% of the project. All of these processes take time and occur long before cones are set up on a road.

Who is paying for these projects?

- Federal funding covers 87% of funding on these projects.
- The rest (13%) is covered by funds from the state of Montana.
- Your property taxes will not increase in order to pay for this work.

What will traffic look like during these projects?

- Traffic will be unaffected until the projects move into construction.
- These projects are still early in the design phase. As such, construction and traffic control plans have not yet been finalized. We welcome ideas and comments from the public for what you would like to see in terms of traffic control.
- Once we move into construction, it would be prudent to plan for additional travel time or to use alternative routes where possible.

How long will these projects be in construction?

- Because these projects are still very early in the design phase, details of how long construction will take have not yet been finalized.
- At this time, it is anticipated that each project would take at least one full construction season (from spring to fall) to complete.
- We anticipate construction schedules to be staggered. The two separate projects will be split into different construction schedules.

What will access for bicyclists and pedestrians look like?

- Highway 78 is classified as a rural highway, so we do not anticipate creating sidewalks or dedicated bike lanes for these projects.
- However, we know that many do choose alternative modes of transportation when on this highway. With this in mind, we plan on widening shoulders to four feet in part as an effort to increase safety for bicyclists who ride this corridor.

What about just lowering the speed limit?

- The improvements this project will bring go beyond what a speed limit change might accomplish.
 - For example, fire trucks, broken down vehicles, and law enforcement making a traffic stop currently have no shoulder to pull off onto. These users continue traveling until there is enough space to pull over, and often those spaces are entrances to property. For emergency services especially, that is precious wasted time. Wider shoulders will greatly improve these concerns by providing this vital space.
- Speed limit signs are just one factor drivers take into account when driving. Studies regularly show that lowering the speed limit does not change driver behavior.
- Enforcement is the best way to ensure that people do not speed, but in our rural state, there are far more miles than law enforcement personnel to patrol them. The Montana Department of Transportation is not responsible for enforcing the speed limit and all speed limits are set by the Montana Transportation Commission.
- Residents who do wish to see a speed limit changed can request a speed study, a process that is conducted outside of project planning.
- The process is as follows:
 - As speed zone requests must start at the local level, residents should first obtain buy-in from their local city or county government. The local government agency then contacts the MDT District Office with specific details about the speed zone request.
 - The MDT District office initiates a study through MDT's headquarters in Helena. This study involves gathering and analyzing speed, crash data and citation data considering the context of the roadway (rural, suburban, urban) and adjacent land uses such as residential, commercial or undeveloped land.
 - The study recommendations are presented to the local government for a 60-day review and comment period. After addressing any comments from the local government, MDT places the speed limit proposal on the Transportation Commission's agenda for a final decision. The Transportation Commission is the final authority on all speed limits.
 - The target timeframe for a typical speed study is one year from initial request to Transportation Commission action. Requests are typically handled on a first come, first serve basis.

Will this project remove all of the beautiful curves and make Highway 78 a straight road?

- No. There are no plans to make this highway a completely flat and straight road. This landscape is hilly/mountainous and it is not feasible to fully flatten given the topography.
- Our plans will soften sharp and steep curves, keeping curves in place but making them more gradual.
- The beautiful views of this highway will still be in place once work is complete.

How do I provide a comment or stay up to date on this work?

- It is crucial to provide input while adjustments can still be made, so please reach out sooner rather than later.
- Though the budget might not accommodate every change, all ideas are welcome and considered.
- Questions or comments can be sent to:
 - Email: Contact Takami at takami@bigskypublicrelations.com
 - Project Hotline: 406-207-4484 during business hours
 - Mail: C/O Big Sky Public Relations, PO Box 732, Bozeman MT 59771
- Learn more about the projects at: <http://bitly.com/highway78>.