

**Missoula County Commissioners**

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BCC 2021-062  
March 4, 2021

Dear Director Long, Chairman Frazier and commissioners,

Missoula County respectfully requests that the Transportation Commission rename the Higgins Avenue Bridge in Missoula as “Beartracks Bridge.”

As you may know, this bridge is currently under reconstruction. The completion of this project will provide an excellent opportunity to not only dedicate a completely refurbished piece of infrastructure for future generations, but also do so in a way that helps make our community more inclusive and fosters greater respect and understanding between all our citizens.

Many pieces of infrastructure in Missoula County reflect the names of early Missoula community leaders, presidents, tree species, etc., but there is virtually no prominent reference to or recognition of the Indigenous people who have called this place home for millennia.

After extensive research and internal consultation with tribal elders and historians, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes proposed to us the name Beartracks Bridge. Beartracks is the name by which the Vanderburg family has long been known and is associated with some of the most highly respected Salish leaders over the past two centuries. Alexander Beartracks was a sub-chief who signed both the Hellgate and Lame Bull Treaties in 1855. His daughter, Mary Beartracks, married Louis Vanderburg, who was a sub-chief under Chief Charlo. During the forced removal of some 300 Salish people from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead Reservation in 1891 — the sad event in Montana’s history often called the Salish “Trail of Tears” — Mr. Vanderburg led one of the groups, and they crossed the Clark Fork River at the Higgins Bridge (many of them may have forded the river instead of attempting to cross what was at that time a rickety structure).

Many subsequent members of the Vanderburg/Beartracks family have been prominent leaders and respected tribal members, including renowned and beloved cultural teachers, numerous members of the Séliš-Q’ispé Elders Cultural Advisory Council, and honored military veterans.

In conferring the name Beartracks Bridge, we can show our respect not only for the Beartracks/Vanderburg family, but also the Salish people as a whole, the sacrifices they endured, and their enduring heritage and presence in our community today.

We've attached letters of support from the CSKT Tribal Council and the City of Missoula, along with historical background material on the name "Beartracks." Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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David Strohmaier, Chair

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Josh Slotnick, Commissioner

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Juanita Vero, Commissioner

BCC/ac

Cc: Shelly Fyant, chairwoman, CSKT Tribal Council  
Tony Incashola, director, Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee  
City of Missoula  
Bob Vosen, district administrator, Montana Department of Transportation

Attachments:

Letter of support from CSKT Tribal Council  
Letter of support from City of Missoula  
Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee background document