

Residents Relocate for New Roadway

Wyoming Department of Transportation Takes Charge



Houses on Fifth Avenue in Cheyenne, WY were purchased for the Norris Viaduct project and sold for salvage.

BY KELLY ETZEL DOUGLAS

The residents never liked living a block away from the Frontier Refinery in Cheyenne, but they had grown used to it. So when the government needed to purchase their homes for a road improvement project, the residents had mixed feelings.

The city of Cheyenne's Norris Viaduct Improvement Project required a major relocation effort. While federal laws dictated how each household was to be moved, the Wyoming Department of

Transportation (WYDOT) Right of Way Relocation Agents Karen Vance and Rick McKee took on the responsibility of helping each resident handle the situation.

During the relocation project, Karen and Rick learned everyone's story, including their families, jobs and plans for the future. Everyone's relocation experience was different, Karen said. "You can't consider them as a group of people. You have to work with them as individuals."

The Project

There were two major reasons for the project. First, the bridge over the Union Pacific Railroad tracks, known as the Norris Viaduct, had been built in 1952 and needed to be replaced. Second, traffic south of the bridge had increased, and both passenger vehicles and commercial trucks were having difficulty navigating two 90-degree turns where Duff Avenue, 5th Street and Morrie Avenue skirted the oil refinery.

Jeff Fanning, Assistant City Engineer for Cheyenne, explained that the roadway had become a minor arterial for the city. "You want continuity in your traffic flow, and 90-degree turns don't do that," Jeff said.

Project planners, with input from the community, redesigned the bridge and roadway to accommodate four lanes of traffic, smoother turns and two traffic lights. The new traffic flow is designed to run along the edge of the refinery, and won't cut off any homes from the existing neighborhood. The widened road will create a buffer between the neighborhood and refinery. A sidewalk along the realignment connects to the Cheyenne Greenway.

To create the roadway, the city needed to remove 35 properties, many of which were single-family homes. The total project cost was estimated at \$27 million and includes a new bridge, a redesigned, wider roadway, water and sewer upgrades and the relocation of a 54" storm pipe.

Laramie County voters approved the project on a sixth-penny tax referendum in 2003. The city also secured \$4 million in federal grants. Because it doesn't have an appraisal and relocation division of its own, the city hired WYDOT's Right of Way Program to move residents and buy property.

Preparing to Move

WYDOT's Right of Way Program typically moves between 5-10 households each year for projects around the state and has experience with both the emotions and laws that govern a move.

For the Norris Viaduct project, the government bought 35 properties. Of those properties, 21 households were owner-occupied and 14 were rentals. Some property owners had died, and some rentals were vacant. Other residents chose to move out of Cheyenne for various reasons. That left 26 households for right of way to relocate.

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The city, along with WYDOT, began hosting public meetings on the project in 2004. The plans were finalized in 2005, and WYDOT began appraising houses. They followed a careful schedule, one that would include a lot of contact with residents. The last resident moved out in February 2007.

Rick and Karen separated out groups of homes. They worked with an average of five households at a time, making home visits and explaining how WYDOT would help them relocate. They chose homes that were close together, so that as people moved out, no one would be surrounded by vacant homes. "It's a lot of little steps, and it doesn't go very fast," Rick said.

Laws Protect Residents

The first home visit usually includes an appraiser from right of way who inspects the property and determines the amount that the government will offer. Property owners are also given an opportunity to conduct an independent inspection. When the final home price has been decided and the property owner agrees, they sign an agreement and the move begins.

"The law is very clear; there is no grey area about what to pay," said Right of Way Program Manager John Sherman. "The program prides itself on treating people fairly and on following the law."

John noted that, over the last five years, WYDOT has bought property from about 2,000 owners. Some of the property included houses; while other property did not. Of the 2,000 property owners contacted, only 25 refused to sell. According to John, all were willing to settle before the case went before a judge.



Alignment F was the chosen plan for the Norris Viaduct reconstruction project in Cheyenne. While the city will oversee the project, WYDOT's Right of Way Program helped move 26 households for the reconstruction.

Federal relocation laws protect residents by defining every step required of a project. Basic federal requirements include these steps:

- Personally contact each property owner and explain the acquisition process, including the right to accompany the appraiser during inspection.
- Provide the owner with a written offer of the estimate and a summary statement of the basis for the offer.
- Conduct negotiations without any attempt to coerce the property owner into reaching an agreement.
- Provide at least 90 days written notice of the date by which the move is required.
- Pay the agreed purchase price before requiring the property owner to surrender possession of the property being acquired.
- The replacement home must be decent, safe and sanitary. In addition, no one is required to move without an available comparable replacement dwelling to live in. The replacement home is also inspected by Right of Way Program Agents.

"The residents have many decisions to make, so we don't rush them," Rick said. "We realized that once they got excited about relocating to a new place, most of them wanted to get going."

Right of way also hires movers or pays residents to move themselves. They pay for incidentals related to the move, and sometimes pay a lump sum to cover a deficit between the price of the old house and the price of a comparable replacement.

Tom Mason, Director of the federally-funded Metropolitan Planning Organization, conducted the environmental assessment for the Norris Viaduct project. He enjoyed working with the Right of Way Program. "To my understanding, there were no major problems with anyone involved during the entire project. That had a lot to do with the professionalism of the right of way team," Tom said. "And because the location was so close to the refinery, many of the residents were more than happy to find their way out."

The Norris Viaduct relocation was a complex project for right of way. With the right team of professionals involved in every phase, the project has gone smoothly. The city began removing houses in February 2007 and hopes to begin construction in the fall. The project is expected to last less than two years. ●