

# Vail Daily

## A hard look at I-70

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**by Allen Best**  
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VAIL - A coalition of primarily environmental groups is calling for an expanded study of what to do on Interstate 70 between Denver and Eagle County. They say the existing study, called a "programmatic environmental impact statement," does not give rail-based options a fair shake.

"We want to see a rail option or options given the same hearing that the highway and bus alternatives are being given," says Gary Frey, a representative of Colorado Trout Unlimited.

Frey claims the process used by the Colorado Department of Transportation to arrive at nine alternatives was fundamentally prejudiced for highway expansion and against rail and other mass-transit. However, one alternative does call for a guideway system for buses - an idea that is drawing some belated interest from one Summit County commissioner.

CDOT has rejected the call for a supplemental impact statement as unnecessary.

"We have actually gone into too much detail already," says Jeff Kullman, transportation director for I-70 between Vail and Kansas. The process, he explained, is intended to provide enough information for broad-brush questions. Precise environmental impacts will be documented after specific plans, such as highway widening, are adopted.

### Spenny study

The study is the third since the mid-1980s and, at a cost of \$20 million so far, the most expensive. Launched in 1999, it yielded the draft impact statement that was issued in December 2004. A final statement is expected to be released in late summer - along with a decision by state officials about which alternative, or mix of alternatives, they intend to pursue.

The Federal Highway Administration, a partner in the I-70 decision-making process, has also ruled that there is no compelling need for a supplemental impact statement.

The key argument involves the process required by the federal National Environmental Policy Act - known as "NEPA" - which is triggered any time federal money, land or agencies are involved. I-70 has all three triggers.

Frey, a retiree who worked extensively with NEPA regulations as a federal employee for more than 30 years, argues that the process used for I-70 does not go far enough in divulging environmental impacts. The alternatives identify the types of impacts, such as to wetlands, but not the magnitude.

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Any snowfall along I-70 can bring traffic to a crawl. The bigger issue is capacity, though, as the state's population grows.  
**Summit Daily/Brad Odekirk**



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"The key is not whether some wetlands will be lost, but rather how much, so that you can make a value judgment," Frey said. With that information in hand, he said, decision-makers might choose an alternative because the environmental impacts are less - even if it costs more.

The environmental impact statements required by NEPA are intended to provide enough information to make comparisons, "so you know what values you are losing, and what the trade-offs are," added Frey. "NEPA is essentially a tool to look at non-monetary gains and losses, and comparing them against monetary issues."

### **Rail costs**

In the case of I-70, many of the rail-based alternatives among the 125 options reviewed by state transportation planners and consultants were removed from further consideration because of their costs. The state imposed an arbitrary ceiling of \$4 billion for the I-70 improvements, although only a trickle of that money is expected to be available during the next 10 to 15 years.

While some early proponents of rail favored a monorail using various types of power systems, including magnetic levitation, Frey's coalition - which includes several Sierra Club chapters, Audubon, and the League of Women Voters - wants a new look at more conventional rail systems now used in Europe.

A representative of one company, Switzerland-based Stadler Rail AG, gave several presentations this week in Denver and Summit County. The Pikes Peak cog railroad is a Stadler product, and the company has several rail systems in place on grades of up to 7 percent.

Frey's group, in concert with officials from Clear Creek County, is also soliciting the Denver Regional Council of Governments to seek a supplemental impact statement.

"Some believe that the entire PEIS process was little more than an exercise to justify a decision that had already been made by CDOT in favor of a highway expansion project," Harry Dale, a Clear Creek County commissioner, recently told a Council of Governments subcommittee.

Dale and others are calling for more study of how an I-70 transit system would connect to Denver International Airport as well as to the FasTracks system now being assembled in the Denver area. The existing I-70 study ends at C-470, between Golden and Morrison. CDOT's Kullman says the state has been working with the FasTracks planners, if no precise plans for connections have been settled. "It's workable," he added.

### **Getting Denver on board**

But the coalition also hopes to get Denver-area governments engaged in the discussion.

"It just can't be the mountains talking to themselves. (The I-70 transportation system) has to somehow interface with the metropolitan population," said Sierra Club member Bert Melcher, who was involved in efforts in the 1960s to keep I-70 out of what is now the Eagles Nest Wilderness Area.

Others are also saying that the \$4 billion cap may be premature and unnecessary. Georgetown Mayor Robert C. Smith says that, based on the \$4.7 billion FasTracks plan approved by Denver-area voters, he believes it's possible that a regional taxing entity could be created to funnel more money toward an I-70 solution. By lumping I-70 and I-25 transportation systems together, he said, perhaps voters state-wide could be persuaded to increase taxes.

Because no money is expected to be available for some years for I-70 solutions, there's no harm to extending the study of rail solutions, Smith added.

The bottom line, in Frey's mind, is trust.

"That's what it's all about. It's very clear that CDOT has a bias toward highways," he said. "I believe their senior management has said they don't do transit systems, so how could they be advocates for them?"

But Bill Wallace, a Summit County commissioner, said he is wondering if CDOT's idea of bus rapid transit is closer to workable than some other rail-based ideas. Instead of buses, he thinks dedicated lanes for rail-based vans might make sense. That removes the interconnectivity of other mass transit ideas, such as how to get people from a terminus in Silverthorne to specific locations, such as Keystone or Vail.

Also a voice in the I-70 discussion is the I-70 Coalition, a consortium that is attempting to provide a unified voice among mountain communities from Aspen to Grand Lake to Idaho Springs.

The I-70 Coalition argues that a longer view is needed for the corridor, 50 years instead of the 25 years used by the state government. This coalition of governments, similar to one of the environmental groups, argues that the \$4 billion cap is artificial and unnecessarily eliminates some mass-transit options. This group envisions some expansion of highway through Clear Creek County, but also wants planning of a mass-transit system to begin. In any event, the coalition opposes any highway widening beyond six lanes.

The I-70 Coalition's report can be found on the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments website:

[www.nwc.cog.co.us/](http://www.nwc.cog.co.us/)

Vail, Colorado

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