

An I-70 consensus?

Yes, with true breakthroughs but also further delays

By Rocky Mountain News

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The good news is that state and local officials have reached a consensus on what to do about relieving congestion along the Interstate 70 corridor between Denver and Vail.

The bad news is that the consensus probably involves, for key stretches of the corridor, passing the buck to those who will be in charge after the year 2025.

Fortunately, the agreement contains real substance, too. Depending on how soon it spurs action, the deal may well vindicate the resolve of Gov. Bill Ritter and his executive director of the Colorado Department of Transportation, Russ George, to step back last year from the previous administration's rejection of mass transit along the corridor as too expensive, in the hope of making the mountain communities part of the eventual solution.

In the end, those communities did indeed endorse a series of projects that involve widening portions of I-70 to six lanes, including west from Floyd Hill through the Idaho Springs twin tunnels. Widening those tunnels in itself represents a significant concession from high-country interests - one we frankly doubted we'd see. So congratulations to George's diplomatic skills in helping to pull it off.

Nevertheless, the price of agreeing to those sensible, critical projects was steep: the state's formal commitment to support a mass-transit system of unspecified type between Denver and Vail.

While the deal doesn't actually rule out expanding the highway to six lanes through the sensitive segments next to Idaho Springs and Georgetown, no such work could be considered until after 2025 - and only then if efforts to put in mass transit had faltered for one reason or another.

We're by no means dismissing in principle any mass transit along the corridor. Yet it's clear that the forms of transit most often mentioned by proponents - rail and monorail - would be staggeringly expensive. Nor is it apparent they'd attract much ridership, especially during the week.

Dedicated bus lanes might be a more realistic transit alternative. Still, it's hard to see how even bus lanes could offer anything like the convenience and congestion relief that would be provided simply by completing a widened highway along the entire corridor.

Finding money for any I-70 mass-transit system will be a huge problem, so it's possible that this important corridor agreement merely delays the day of reckoning for some segments of the highway by 17 years.

We certainly hope that's not the case. But given the history of the corridor, we wouldn't want to bet against it, either.