

# Vail Daily

## Are Olympics tunnel's only hope?

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One councilman says only such a major event could provide money to bury I-70

**Edward Stoner**

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VAIL — Burying the interstate through Vail is possible. But the idea has a long way to go before it's plausible.

“Even in a 50-year window, do I think a \$4 to \$5 billion in the Vail corridor would pop up on somebody's radar screen?” said Vail Town Manager Stan Zemler. “I'm not sure why it would.”

Last month, the town released a feasibility study on tunneling Interstate 70 through Vail. The study said it's possible, but didn't consider how to pay for the project, whose initial cost estimate is around \$3 billion.

The study was completed last year but wasn't released until last month, when council members said they were interested in it. The Town Council will get a formal presentation on it later this month.

Mayor Rod Slifer said he isn't sure how Vail would find the money in the next two decades to bury the interstate.

“I don't know where it comes from,” he said.

In the meantime, Slifer said, he'd like to see less costly solutions pursued before Vail looks at tunneling under Vail Mountain. Lowering the interstate and putting a lid on it in certain locations — a method called “cut and cover” — could be less costly and could be done in stages, Slifer said.

But Councilman Greg Moffet said he thinks a tunnel solution can be found within the next 20 years.

“I don't think it's quixotic at all,” he said. It has the potential to solve community problems, he said, primarily noise from the interstate.

Moffet acknowledged that funding wouldn't happen on a local or even a state level. “It's screaming for a federal solution,” he said.

The next step might be to develop more sophisticated lobbying efforts in Washington to try to garner support there, Moffet said.

### **Not on the radar screen**

Zemler, who serves as vice chair of the I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition, said the town's study represented the most drastic end of the spectrum as the town looks at ways to reduce interstate noise.

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Burying I-70 through Vail is possible says a study recently released by the town that did not explore ways to fund work that could cost as much as \$5 billion.  
**Preston Utley/Vail Daily**



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At the other end of the spectrum are things like using quiet pavement on the interstate or even advising residents on improvements they can make to their homes to reduce noise.

The I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition is a group of counties, towns, chambers of commerce and companies that span from the Denver area to Glenwood Springs. It was formed to respond to the Colorado Department of Transportation's long-range plan for the interstate.

The coalition wants mass transit along the interstate and relief in spots where traffic builds up, like Idaho Springs and the Eisenhower Tunnel. The state transportation agency is hoping to have about \$4 billion for I-70 from Glenwood Springs to Golden over the next 20 years, Zemler said.

The agency and the coalition are looking at places that are dangerous and places that are congested, Zemler said. Those criteria don't put a Vail tunnel on the priority list.

Zemler noted that many key aspects of a tunnel plan haven't been studied or thoroughly discussed, including whether town infrastructure could support additional development where I-70 is now. Such development has been envisioned as one way to pay for a tunnel.

Another question, Zemler said, is whether it would be appealing to divert cars away from Vail and its tourist-dependent economy.

### **Winter games**

The state transportation agency recently released its 25-year planning document which includes large projects such as realigning the interstate through Dowd Junction at a cost of \$484 million, and even building mass transit between Denver and Gypsum at a cost of over \$5.6 billion.

Even those proposals outpaced the money available for them. The report didn't mention the Vail tunnel.

Councilman Kent Logan said a study of the tunnel should be part of the town's long-range plan.

"We can start the ball rolling, but it's clearly an issue that's well beyond the scope of something the town could feasibly push to fruition," he said.

A larger force — perhaps a bid by Colorado for the Winter Olympics — would have to give it some larger momentum.

"There has to be a serious event to really move this forward," he said.

Noise was a big problem that residents cited in the townwide 20/20 planning event in August.

The Vail tunnel study looked at five different options for burying the interstate. Putting a tunnel under Vail Mountain was deemed the most feasible of the tunnel options.

The study complemented a previous study that looked at the "cut and cover" method, said Greg Hall, director of Vail Public Works. The 2005 study cost between \$5,000 and \$8,000, Hall said.

Vail Village Homeowners Association Executive Director Jim Lamont, an advocate of burying I-70, said one idea is privatizing the tunnel, charging tolls for those who want to use it, and keeping a road with a slow speed limit going through the middle of Vail. Developing some of the land where I-70 is now is also an idea, he said.

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Vail, Colorado

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