

## **Cooling economy could send I-70 train talk off track**

By David O. Williams

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December 1, 2008 — With the price of oil plummeting, the economy tanking and Colorado's roads crumbling, there hasn't been much post-election talk about high-speed rail service between Denver and the state's major mountain resorts.

But that doesn't mean the concept is completely dead, according to at least one Western Slope state legislator whose district is bisected by the often-overwhelmed Interstate 70 corridor, which is critical to the state's ski, tourism and energy industries.

While Gov. Bill Ritter's transportation panel recently recommended finding another \$1.5 billion a year just to maintain and upgrade the state's existing network of roads and bridges, Rep. Christine Scanlan (D-Dillon) said she doesn't necessarily think the funding shortfall precludes pursuing a high-speed rail system that connects the Front Range and the Western Slope.

"The ongoing study that's being undertaken by the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority (RMRA) will answer a lot of questions about the feasibility of doing that and the price tag of doing that," said Scanlan, who on Nov. 4 beat Republican Ali Hasan. Hasan campaigned heavily on introducing a bill to require a mountain monorail along the I-70 corridor.

Throughout the campaign, Scanlan urged allowing the one-year, \$1.5 million RMRA study — paid for by federal grants and set to be completed in June — to run its course and show whether the technology and demand for mountain mass transit are sufficient.

"We might be able to put something together at that point, and it leverages federal dollars so we're not in it alone as a state trying to figure out the funding," Scanlan said.

"I actually do think there's private money to be had if there's the right project that makes the right economic sense and shows that ridership will support the cost of doing that kind of project."

Hasan, who did not answer requests for comment for this story, frequently questioned the need for more study on the topic during the campaign, and he insisted a monorail could be legislated and put on the ballot. After his defeat Nov. 4, Hasan promised to continue to push for a mountain rail system.

But one rail expert called Hasan's campaign promises uninformed because they ignored the history of mountain mass transit bids and the reality of low ridership numbers in a largely rural area that would fall far short of offsetting the enormous costs of building such a project — estimated at anywhere between \$5 billion and \$10 billion.

Thomas Hopkins headed up an international consortium that, in the late 1990s, thoroughly studied the various rail options along the I-70 corridor and concluded that

because of the steep grades and twisting turns, no existing technology could reach high enough speeds to make passenger service practical. Riders would have to travel faster than cars in order to pay the premium prices needed to support the system, Hopkins said.

Hopkins' group in 2001 asked voters statewide to approve a \$50 million test system it hoped would prove the viability of a new wheeled train on an elevated guide-way that would be propelled magnetically at speeds high enough and with G-forces low enough to make travel in the steep mountain corridor convenient and comfortable enough to charge premium pricing.

The Rail Authority's Harry Dale, a Clear Creek County commissioner who favors a rail solution over widening I-70 through his jurisdiction, said the challenges of the super-steep corridor, which rises more than 5,000 feet between Denver and the Eisenhower Tunnel, may mean the rail will have to follow another route.

Scanlan agrees with that possibility but says she is glad that is back on the table as an option after the administration of former rail Gov. Bill Owens steadfastly opposed any sort of serious discussion of mountain rail.

"It may be the I-70 corridor is not the best route to try and do mass transit on because of the grade," Scanlan said. "They may have to look at whether it's more toward [U.S.] 285 [southwest of Denver], and then there's environmental implications to all of it."

Others say a more practical alternative to a train connecting Denver International Airport to the mountains is local service using existing rails in key resort areas such as Aspen, Steamboat and Vail. Dormant Union Pacific tracks already bisect Eagle County, connecting that regional resort area's airport to the ski areas of Vail and Beaver Creek.

"It's just a no-brainer — it's right there, it has divided the county, people have built along it and it's just the ideal transit-oriented solution," said Eagle County Commissioner Peter Runyon.

He added that the county has lobbied rail supporter Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-New Jersey) to pressure Union Pacific to allow passenger service on its rails and to help change federal legislation barring light rail cars on freight lines. Lautenberg's son, Josh, is a Vail Valley Realtor.

Runyon said such a tourism-oriented mountain-only line could also transport workers from lower-rent towns to the high-priced resorts where there are jobs. He has no faith that a train connecting Denver to Eagle County will ever be built.

"I do not have vast amounts of optimism of any sort of advanced guide-way system coming up the I-70 corridor, certainly not while I'm county commissioner," Runyon said.

"Not that I wouldn't encourage it, but there's just no money. The voters don't want to tax themselves; we're going through difficult economic times."

