



Environmental focus needed on I-70

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SUMMIT COUNTY - Some community activists and civic leaders say a critical environmental element is missing from the planning efforts for the Interstate 70 mountain corridor.

"We have to start the environmental part of this discussion right now," said Bert Melcher, transportation chair for the regional Sierra Club branch. CDOT's draft proposal for I-70 improvements is woefully short on details when it comes to air and water quality impacts, Melcher said at a recent meeting of Our Future Summit in Frisco.

The local grassroots group invited several speakers who discussed their views on recent I-70 milestones, including the release of CDOT's draft study, and the recent I-70 coalition meeting in Granby.

"I heard the words 'environmental justice' only once during the entire meeting," Melcher said of the Granby conference, expressing concern about the vagueness and generality of any environmental discussions, as well as reliance on post-hoc mitigation.

"They didn't have access to any ecologists, sociologists, there was no environmental advisory committee," Melcher said. "There was no mention of air quality and environmental health and toxic impacts," he said.

At stake is the quality of a high-mountain air shed that's still relatively pristine, not to mention strict air quality standards in place for designated wilderness areas in the corridor.

'Sleeping dogs?'

Ed Rapp, working with Clear Creek County as a consultant on I-70, said CDOT's draft study is riddled with hidden assumptions that undermine the credibility of the document.

Rapp said the Colorado School of Mines and the University of Denver have teamed up to offer a detailed analysis of CDOT's draft environmental impact statement, to be submitted as a formal comment before the May 24 deadline.

In one example, Rapp said CDOT didn't consider the potential downstream impacts from disturbing sites where there could be a potential for mercury and arsenic contamination in Clear Creek.

"They've got 23 of these sleeping dogs, old mill sites with mercury and arsenic, out there," Rapp said, suggesting that CDOT failed to analyze the economic impacts a potential toxic release could have on Coors, down in Golden, relying on Clear Creek water for the massive brewery.

Rapp said he wasn't confident that CDOT would seriously consider the regionally preferred alternative being constructed by 30-plus towns and counties that make up the I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition.

Those communities, from Clear Creek County all the way to Glenwood Springs, want to see an immediate start to fixing choke points and addressing safety hot spots, as well as some serious planning for a long-range transit

alternative. Still at issue is the timing and phasing of improvements, especially through Clear Creek County, where residents want to know exactly how much six-laning is proposed.

But Rapp insists that CDOT is moving toward a scripted outcome, with six-laning big stretches of the highway already pre-determined at the policy level.

He says it's really a political battle now, and that the corridor communities need to call in every political favor and form a strong regional transit group with state-mandated authority. State law, for example, enables formation of a rural transit district, including the Roaring Fork Transit Authority.

Rapp advised the corridor coalition to work along that track with state lawmakers, and he said Colorado's congressional delegation also needs to be in the loop. One way of leveraging influence over CDOT's decision is to keep the pressure on the Federal Highway Administration, Rapp said.

Essentially, if CDOT ignores the coalition's input and marches forward with a big six-lane proposal, Rapp said the idea would be to convince the feds not to sign off on the project.

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[BACK](#) 