



European trains like the Stadler might be best solution for routes like I-70 between Denver and Vail
Courtesy of Stadler

Experts say federal funds for mountain rail to Vail likely tough to come by

Planners push for statewide rail strategy even if I-70 system is decades away

By David O. Williams

June 15, 2008 — Rail experts at an I-70 Coalition meeting at Copper Mountain Thursday expressed doubt any federal dollars would ever become available for a fixed guide-way rail system along the state's busiest east-west highway connecting Denver and the Front Range to the state's mountain resorts.

Mass transit, especially some type of mountain rail system, is back on the table after a recent deal between key stakeholders along the I-70 corridor, including many of the local governments and the Colorado Department of Transportation. But that doesn't mean a mountain monorail, or any other I-70 train, is any closer to reality.

Funding remains the biggest hurdle for a project that could cost in excess of \$5 billion, and rail experts Thursday said federal dollars for such projects will almost always go to densely populated urban areas along the coasts.

A statewide tax increase probably is the only way to fund such a system, experts said, but that would likely necessitate linking I-70 rail to a package including other routes such as a high-speed train on the I-25 corridor running north-south along Colorado's Front Range of the Rocky Mountains.

In 2002, the last time a tax increase to study mountain rail was proposed, the \$50 million measure lacked support throughout much of the state not directly impacted by I-70 congestion, which is largely viewed as a problem created by skier traffic in the winter and tourists in the peak summer months.

State Rep. Christine Scanlan, a resident of the mountain town of Dillon near I-70, said any rail system will have to be part of an overall solution to the state's transit problems.

"There's also mass transit being talked about running north-south all the way from Wyoming to New Mexico following the I-25 corridor," Scanlan said. "The congestion northbound on I-25 is some of the worst in the state. It's skier[-like] traffic every day down there, so I don't

think it's just a mountain rail line we're talking about ultimately."

The Rocky Mountain Rail Authority has been charged by the federal government with conducting a high-speed rail study along both the I-70 and I-25 corridors. It's expected to be completed by July 2009, according to the rail authority's Harry Dale, who's also a Clear Creek county commissioner.

"We've been advocating for some time now that the state actually participate in doing a statewide transit plan that looks at the integration of a high-speed system in both the I-70 and I-25 corridors with the local feeder systems, so that if you're doing a statewide ballot initiative, you're providing funds not just for the high-speed system but also for those feeder systems," Dale said. "Because you can't just dump off a whole lot of people without then having systems to move them around."

Allan Zreet, an expert with a Dallas-based transit consulting company, said somewhat lower-speed trains are probably in order along I-70, where there would need to be frequent stops at various mountain towns and ski areas. He also urged local governments to start planning for transit centers even if a rail system is decades away.


Eagle County Commissioner Peter Runyon, who represents the county on the I-70 Coalition, said the reason trains work well in the ski-resort regions of Europe is that the towns and cities in the Alps are more densely designed, closer together and built with mass transit in mind.

"Their cities absolutely lend themselves to transit-oriented development," Runyon said, adding that rail in the Colorado high country has to be a very serious option, even if it's decades away, given spiking fuel costs and studies that project places like Eagle County will see a doubling of population in the next 25 years. "We can't stop thinking about the future just because I'm going to be dead before it happens."

But Greg Moffet, a former Vail councilman and member of the I-70 coalition, said it's apples to oranges to compare Rocky Mountain ski resorts to the European Alps.

"The difference between where we are and where huge amounts of train infrastructure exist, is one, we don't have the infrastructure, but two, the distances we're talking about are vastly greater than most of the rest of the world that relies on train infrastructure, especially for commuters," said Moffet, who advocates less-expensive congestion solutions such as better signage to inform drivers of road conditions or traffic problems, more buses and park-and-rides, and discouraging truck traffic on peak ski weekends.



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