



Group hopes for some unity on I-70

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January 23, 2005

VAIL - If perhaps not quite as challenging as herding cats, Gary Severson has his work cut out in trying to forge a consensus among 29 towns and counties over the future of the increasingly clogged Interstate 70.

"That's easier said than done," said Severson, executive director of the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. "The towns are as diverse as night and day, socially and politically."

Jurisdictions range from Pitkin County with its chart-busting demographics for income and education to Walden, a ranching town of less than 1,000 people near the Wyoming border.

Also bound up in a new intergovernmental agreement are towns from Idaho Springs to Glenwood Springs. The official umbrella organization is the Rural Resort Region.

As well, group members have met with Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. While Denver is not formally in the group, Hickenlooper made it clear he wants to be part of the conversation, say group members.

"It will be a challenge to get everybody on the same page," says Vail Mayor Rod Slifer.

Time to talk

The first such effort to draw a consensus culminated in 1997 with a broad call from residents along the I-70 mountain corridor for a monorail of some sort.

The Colorado Department of Transportation then launched a more rigorous, \$23 million process that has culminated recently in a document called a programmatic environmental impact statement, or PEIS.

In this document, the broad-brush environmental impacts have been evaluated, so that less review will be necessary after specific components are chosen. The formal public comment period is scheduled to end on March 10, and the department of transportation, in conjunction with the Federal Highways Administration, is scheduled to issue a formal decision next year.

However, Severson is lobbying the department of transportation to extend the deadline twice, to June 25, giving his organization time to attempt a unified response from a large swath of the mountain communities serviced directly by I-70.

Tom Norton, the department of transportation's executive director, says he is "very seriously" considering granting the extensions.

"We need an organized partner," he said of Severson's group. But he said he will grant extensions only if there is evidence of progress in developing consensus.

Resort doormat

All 29 jurisdictions who are now part of the coalition will be approached individually to help pinpoint their potential agreement.

"If you have a good track record of people agreeing, then you attack the things in which there are differences," said Severson, who described himself as "an old consensus-builder with more than 30 years of experience."

A major session among the jurisdictions is being planned for May.

At the outset, there would appear to be large divisions among the various towns and counties. Clear Creek County has most adamantly insisted that it does not want to be the doormat for the resort counties of the Western Slope.

The overwhelming response to highway widening during the last several years could be characterized as "over my dead body."

"What people say now may not be what the consensus is going to be several weeks from now," Severson said. "That's why we have to allow the process to work."

Or not - maybe differences will remain. Severson concedes as much.

"The coalition may have a different look. It may have some additions and some subtractions," he said.

He hopes to see Aspen, Carbondale and other Roaring Fork Valley towns as well as Lake County enlisted into the group, he said.

Mass transit

Where has such consensus building worked before? Severson cited the council of government's unified response of the White River National Forest management plan.

Dan Hormachae, the Forest Service's director of planning, agrees the unified response influenced the forest plan.

"It adds quite a bit of credence when a group works through complex issues," he says.

Stan Zemler, Vail's town manager, had experience previously with trying to create a consensus along a transportation corridor. Before coming to Vail in 2003, he served in various capacities in Boulder, most recently as director of the chamber of commerce.

The task there was to forge a vision for U.S. 36, a.k.a. the Boulder Turnpike. Forging consensus on I-70 will be far, far more difficult, he said.

"Whatever we choose to do, there will not be nearly enough money," he said.

But Zemler sees agreement about the desire for mass transit, he said, but not necessarily the timing.

"I don't think there's anybody in our coalition who doesn't, in some fashion, support mass transit," he said. "It's a matter of when it comes."

Vail, Colorado

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