



I-70 group gets down to nitty-gritty

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GRANBY - Planning the future of Interstate 70 through the mountain towns west of Denver is a little like playing Candy Land, a state transportation official said, referring to the popular board game that involves a chancy quest for a make-believe chocolate kingdom.

"You draw a card," said Jeff Kullman, a regional transportation director, at Thursday's I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition meeting near Granby. "Sometimes you go forward, sometimes you go back five steps, sometimes you have to do a loop. Our goal is to draw that right card to get to Candy Land - whatever that might be."

The two-day session, which ended Friday, was attended by representatives from 26 different towns and counties and had the lofty goal of finding regional consensus on a visionary, 50-year transit plan for the freeway.

The state projects dramatic increases in traffic on the highway in coming decades, so that even with proposed improvements, travel times between many destinations will remain the same as they are now, only with more cars able to make the trip.

Recognizing that population growth in the state will lead to increased travel on all highways - not just I-70 - the Colorado Department of Transportation is looking more broadly at how other east-west highways will fit into that larger growth picture, Kullman explained.

But the highways south of I-70 carry only a small fraction of the total trans-mountain traffic. U.S. Highway 50, for example, only carries about 3 percent, Kullman said, emphasizing I-70 will carry the brunt of the burden.

The only way to do projects like I-70 in the mountains is in "big chunks," Kullman said.

To get priority funding for I-70 work, there needs to be widespread support from the many different entities involved, Kullman said, using U.S. Highway 36 from Boulder to Denver as an example.

"They've been able to put their project to the head of the heap," Kullman said.

The state is looking for a solid plan, Kullman said, asking members of the coalition to come up with ideas that are "technically, environmentally and financially logical."

'Behavior modification'

Breaking up into groups of eight and 10, the representatives started charting out their vision of how I-70 will look in 50 years.

Not surprisingly there is some recognition in the region that the final plan will likely be a combination of more lanes and mass transit. Others have emphasized the need to integrate land-use and transportation planning.

"I'm concerned about the short-sighted way we look at things in this state," Pitkin County Commissioner Mick Ireland said. "I want to challenge some of the assumptions on statewide growth. Will your communities be

willing to accommodate that growth?

"Do we want to accommodate the projected growth, as well as the induced additional growth that I-70 improvements will spur," he asked. "Or will quality-of-life issues force constraints on growth?"

Some of the most critical issues, including the peak-hour congestion between Denver and Summit County, is caused by user patterns, said some of the representatives, urging the coalition and the department of transportation "to get serious about behavior modification."

That could include alternative truck routes, incentives for non-peak travel, as well as alternatives like toll travel and high-occupancy vehicle lanes.

Nearly everyone at the meeting appeared to agree that some immediate improvements to certain choke points are needed as soon as possible, and that the time and budget constraints so far laid out by the state are unrealistic.

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On the Web

To view the Colorado Department of Transportation's study of I-70, go to www.i70mtncorridor.com.

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