

Vail Daily

I-70 planning grinds on

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SUMMIT COUNTY - With another ski season ramping up over the busy Thanksgiving holiday, travelers along I-70 are preparing for the inevitable congestion that can make the trip to and from the mountain resorts slow and sometimes dangerous.

There's no immediate solution in sight. The expanding Front Range population means a steady growth in the number of I-70 trips, and plans by the Colorado Department of Transportation to significantly improve the highway are years away from being implemented. In fact, release of the final version of a long-awaited I-70 study has been pushed back until early next year. And once the plan is unveiled, it may be several years until construction actually begins.

But some short-term relief could come from a transportation demand management plan forwarded by the I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition, representing communities and businesses from all along the transportation corridor between Golden and Glenwood Springs.

The plan includes a slew of incentive-based measures aimed at peak congestion times along the interstate. Some of the ideas floated in a draft version of the plan include free close-in parking at ski areas for carpoolers, as well as coupons for discounted goods and services for visitors willing to adjust their travel times to outside peak hours.

The plan also calls for installation of a high-tech traffic monitoring and notification system, which was implemented in a pilot phase this summer as new signs along the highway showing travel times between key points.

The potential benefits of these measures haven't been quantified, coalition director Flo Raitano said. But similar measures have been tried - with mixed success - in other areas.

"The goal is spread out the traffic and numbers we have now," Raitano said, "We'd like to hear from people who are in the traffic on I-70," she said. The idea is see if incentives would be effective in changing travel habits.

"Would you change your travel times if you got free close-in parking at the resorts and a coupon for a free latte? Would free season-long ski storage be an incentive to carpool?" Raitano said. Other incentives could include "mountain money" for early and late arrivals, and for visitors willing to carpool.

Summit County Commissioner Bill Wallace, chair of the coalition, said other measures could include preferential parking for overnight guests, and tiered parking rates based on vehicle occupancy.

Wallace said the idea is to start a shift in people's attitudes about traveling the I-70 corridor.

Traffic sits backed up for miles after the Vail area receives a snowstorm last season that forced the closure of Vail Pass. One partial solution to easing mountain gridlock is seen in new signs telling motorists how long they can expect to get from Point A to Point B along Interstate 70.



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Preston Utley/Daily file photo

Even when physical improvements are made to the highway - and that day could still be 10 years away - changing travel patterns will have to be part of the long-term solution, Wallace said.

Transit option?

The I-70 coalition has also been working to make sure that the Department of Transportation includes mass transit as part of the long-term solution. Nay-sayers claim the technology just isn't available yet, but a pair of neighboring states have aggressively pushed ahead with transit projects that offer a potential roadmap for Colorado.

In both cases, government leadership and buy-in from the business community were crucial to designing and executing transit plans.

In New Mexico, between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, Gov. Bill Richardson put some of his political capital on the line to develop the Rail Runner system, said project manager Chris Blewett at a conference last month.

"He (Richardson) said, 'I'm going to have the first phase of this done in two years.' It was the most important statement he could have made," Blewett said.

"A lot of people thought this was crazy ... People kept saying, 'You can't do this.' We didn't accept any of the conventional wisdom. We kept saying, 'Why not?'"

The first phase of the project, between Belen and Albuquerque, was completed in about two years, just slightly behind the schedule announced by Gov. Richardson. Achieving that goal required an innovative approach, Blewett said.

"We used a streamlined procurement process," he said. "We had no public process and not a single intergovernmental agreement, we didn't do ridership projections, and we had only three budget meetings in two-and-a-half years."

The focus, instead, was on what could really be accomplished, he said.

"We tried to make this thing believable and real. We tried to adopt a European attitude," Blewett said. "This isn't about today. This is about New Mexico's future."

Along Utah's Wasatch Front, squeezed in between the mountains and the Great Salt Lake, people recognized that transportation is the backbone of the state's economy, said Steve Meyer, engineering and construction manager for the Utah Transit Authority.

Meyer said winning over the private sector was key to moving ahead with the mass transit project, where ridership is already double the projected level. Meyer said the state transit agency took a bare-bones, no frills approach - for example buying used railroad cars from other areas. The Utah rail system will serve demand equivalent to an entire lane on I-15, he said.

"It shows you can get it done," Vail town manager Stan Zemler said. "We need to cut the same path and not accept no. And we need to find a statewide solution."

Transit has to be part of that, he said.

"We need to keep an eye on the process and make sure it offers a multi-modal solution with transit as a component," Zemlersaid. "We have to get a transit corridor secured and a commitment to transit."

Funding

Finding the money to create a transit solution for I-70 is a big part of the plan. But a strong Democratic Legislature in Colorado could result in changes in I-70 policy, Wallace said, anticipating new leadership at the Department of Transportation. Wallace said he wouldn't be surprised to see some discussions about putting a statewide transportation funding measure on the ballot in the next few years.

Planning and building a transit system will require not only innovative technology, but an equally creative financing mechanism, most likely through a combination of statewide taxes and bonds, experts said during the recent I-70 Coalition transit workshop and retreat at Copper Mountain.

The most frequently discussed transit alternatives - including various fixed guideway systems running from DIA to the Eagle County Airport or beyond - could cost as much as \$6 billion. For the sake of comparison, the Department of Transportation's annual budget runs about \$800 million.

Statewide funding options could come from a statewide sales tax or a levy on gasoline, said Alan Matlosz, senior vice president of George K. Baum and Company.

"There is no limit to the amount of money to fund the project ... the difficulty is, you have to pay it back," said Matlosz, whose company provides investment banking and financial advisory services to local governments throughout Colorado.

Matlosz outlined several ways that the I-70 coalition might be able to raise the money through existing mechanisms already authorized under state laws, including formation of a metro district that could levy property taxes, or a regional transportation authority that could be funded by sales taxes.

A regional transit authority would require a complex intergovernmental agreement and voter approval for a sales tax increase, and vehicle registration fees of up to \$10 as well. A 2 percent lodging tax could also be levied by a regional transit authority, Matlosz said.

Focusing in on the eight counties represented in the coalition, Matlosz said that, based on some table-top calculations, a 1 percent sales tax could raise about \$52 million annually, based on current taxable retail sales in the region. A \$10 vehicle registration fee would generate another \$2.24 million, he said.

A statewide one-cent gas tax hike could raise about \$25 million annually, while a 10-cent hike could fund about \$4 billion worth of improvements, Matlosz said.

"This state has never had a designated funding transit source," said I-70 coalition director Raitano, adding that a one-half percent statewide sales tax could finance about \$4 billion worth of bonds.

Raitano said the gas tax idea warrants caution and sensitivity to the concerns of people living in rural areas who, out of necessity, drive a lot.

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More info

The I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition Web site is at www.i70mtncorridor.com.

For more info on transit options, go to www.i70mountaintransit.org.

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