



I-70 alternatives delivered to CDOT

By [Bob Berwyn](#)
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SUMMIT COUNTY — In Clear Creek County, trucks pulling out from the westbound weighing station grind immediately into an uphill crawl, slowing traffic streaming toward Western Colorado.

Moving that station to a less obtrusive place is one of ideas the Interstate 70 Mountain Corridor Coalition offers for improving traffic flow on the interstate.

That concept is part of the coalition's comments delivered on Tuesday to state transportation officials in reaction to a draft environmental impact statement.

Towns and counties from Idaho Springs all the way to Garfield County sent the "regionally preferred alternative" to the Colorado Department of Transportation, which called on the coalition to figure out improvements for the stretch of highway between Golden and Glenwood Springs.

The coalition is calling for early action to relieve pinch-point congestion and address critical safety issues, while at the same time planning for some form of long-term mass transit.

The system, the coalition said, must increase capacity and include highway, transit, aviation, pedestrian and bicycle components. The coalition also called for planning to extend 50 years, instead of the 15- to 20-year plan CDOT asked for.

The solutions should be implemented incrementally and address the problem areas first.

The regional alternative goes on to outline a sequence of events, beginning with non-construction options for maximum highway efficiency, including:

- Relocation of the Downieville truck port of entry weighing station;
- A slow-moving vehicle plan;
- Incentives to spread out peak traffic;
- Alternate recreation schedules and enhanced traveler information; and
- A mountain corridor parking plan.

CDOT last year released a voluminous draft programmatic environmental impact statement outlining a potential slate of improvements for the corridor. The formal public comment period ended Tuesday. According to the scheduled timeline, CDOT will release a decision on I-70 in about a year.

The coalition, funded in part by CDOT, will have a seat at the table as the agency formulates a decision.

Handing in the coalition's regionally preferred alternative only marks another step in the process, not a final resolution, said Joann Sorenson, of the Clear Creek I-70 task force.

"We're going to have to keep riding CDOT," Sorenson said. "There are no guarantees that they are going to accept this. We don't know how CDOT will treat the regionally preferred alternative."

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Phase 1

The first sequence of construction is in Clear Creek County, where the coalition identifies sections to improve as soon as possible:

- Auxiliary lane milepost 259 to milepost 253;
 - Six-lane highway improvements from Floyd Hill to the east end of Idaho Springs;
 - New westbound lane, or bore, through the Hidden Valley Tunnel;
 - New eastbound lane, or bore, through the south side of the Twin Tunnel;
 - New eastbound lane, or bore, through the Floyd Hill Tunnel;
 - Auxiliary lanes from Downieville Junction to Empire Junction/US 40 interchange;
 - Curve safety at Fall River Road;
 - Interchange improvements from Morrison through Empire Junction.
- The coalition's first sequence also includes curve safety improvements in Dowd Canyon and west of Wolcott, in Eagle County.

Phase 2

A second sequence addresses construction from Bakerville to Glenwood Springs, including major improvements to the Eisenhower Tunnel.

The sequencing allows for time to evaluate impacts from the first phase:

- Six-lane improvements from Bakerville to the tunnel;
- Interchange improvements and ramp-metering at Loveland Pass/Loveland Ski Area.
- West of the Eisenhower Tunnel, new auxiliary lanes from the Vail Pass interchange to Vail's east entrance and interchange improvements in Silverthorne, Frisco, Copper and west to Vail, Gypsum and Glenwood Springs.

Phase 3

Sequence three addresses the remaining concerns in Clear Creek County, with the exception of Idaho Springs and Dumont and Downieville area, with more evaluation needed before tackling the tough, narrow terrain in Clear Creek Canyon, where residents hope to minimize impacts to their towns:

- Auxiliary lanes from the Georgetown interchange to Silver Plume, built in the most environmentally sensitive design possible, as well as specified noise and visual mitigation, preservation of a continuous bike path and no widening of highway footprint in the Silver Plume and Georgetown National Historic Landmark District;
- Six-lane improvements from Silver Plume to Bakerville/Herman Gulch.

Phase 4

Sequence four includes the "critical" transit mode, which must move both people and goods, and might not follow the same path as I-70, according to the regionally preferred alternative.

The coalition said CDOT must commit funds to planning for transit right from the beginning, with spending on transit for the corridor to climb up to 40 percent in 25 years.

A final I-70 plan must also include consideration of an aviation mode, as well as alternate routes, including other regional east-west highways.

Coalition comments

The inconsistent relationship between time, money and the performance of alternatives was a "pervasive weakness" throughout the draft, according to the coalition's findings, as was the "ambiguity" of the \$4 billion cap as a measure of reasonable economics.

A technical team, headed by Silverthorne public works director Bill Linfield, tabbed several areas requiring further study before finalizing the I-70 decision.

More points requiring analysis include:

- Alternative speed, capacity and reliability in adverse weather conditions;
- The potential disturbance of heavy metals from 23 mill sites in CDOT's I-70 right of way in Clear Creek

County;

- Potential impacts to parks and historic structures;
- Economic impacts to each county during and after construction;
- Inclusion of transit preservation option.

More fiscal study is also needed, the coalition found. That study should focus on the potential for public-private partnerships to fund transit options, including reversible high-occupancy vehicle lanes (like E-470), as well as public-private ownership of transit vehicles.

The coalition also encouraged CDOT to take a look at alternate transit alignments. Avoiding the Twin Tunnels and the Eisenhower-Johnson Tunnels could reduce capital costs.

CDOT's next steps

The biggest single immediate step to address safety issues will take effect before the beginning of next ski season, CDOT Region 1 director Jeff Kullman said, with ramp-metering along some eastbound stretches east of the Eisenhower Tunnel.

Controlling the flow of traffic at on-ramps has reduced accident rates by 30 percent, according to some studies, Kullman said. And it can delay the onset of congestion, he added.

Other early action items envisioned by Kullman — depending on funds — include some new lane configurations and work around the approach to the Twin Tunnels.

Bob Berwyn can be contacted at bberwyn@summitdaily.com.

Comments on the plan

- U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, D-Eldorado Springs, supported the coalition's report. He urged Colorado transportation director Tom Norton to address immediate needs on I-70 between Denver and Glenwood Canyon. "I stand ready to do what I can to help see improvements made to this critical transportation corridor," he wrote in a letter to Norton.

- Club 20, a 50-year-old coalition of private and public organizations in Western Colorado's 22 counties, including Summit County, said that plans for the I-70 corridor should include ideas for north/south routes, ways to minimize adverse environmental impacts and a solution should include multiple modes of transportation.

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