

diane carman | columnist

## I-70 ideas going nowhere fast

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We lucked out. Our carload of five heading for a snowshoeing expedition on Tennessee Pass on Saturday cruised past a jackknifed semi blocking Interstate 70 near the Eisenhower Tunnel. Eastbound, the highway was a linear parking lot rippling over the hills to the horizon and beyond. Westbound was snowpacked but a racetrack by comparison and, hallelujah, we were driving west.

The god of gridlock was smiling on us.

For once.

It's a given if you live along the Front Range and you're a skier, hiker or any kind of outdoorsman that you'll spend hours mired in traffic en route to the mountains. When economic-development types talk about the quality-of-life premium that awaits those who relocate to Colorado, they don't mention I-70, our very own little purgatory.

On Monday, Michael Penny had been meeting with legislators to see if the bill to increase penalties for truckers who defy the chain laws and wreak havoc with traffic can be resurrected. The Frisco town manager and chairman of the coalition to develop plans for solving the I-70 mess called me from his car just as he climbed Floyd Hill on his way home. He had spent 45 minutes behind jackknifed trucks that morning.

"It would be an immediate shift," he said, "a 2007 solution." Senate President Joan Fitzgerald told him the bill was not dead yet. "It was on life-support."

But the coalition members aren't spending a lot of time on half-dead solutions to a monster problem. They're more interested in "the long haul," Penny said, apologizing for the pun.

Penny described a graph of money and time that shows funds for highway expansion peaking in the near future and dropping precipitously as investment in mass transit takes off.

This is the future for I-70.

Exactly how the mass-transit system will look is still to be imagined, but the coalition knows what travelers want.

It must be fast, convenient, fun, easy. It has to accommodate people, gear, pets. It has

to be comfortable and wireless, cause minimal impact on the environment, and operate in wicked snow conditions.

"We assume it will be an advanced guideway system, probably elevated to reduce environmental impact," Penny said.

While the design of the system is unclear, the coalition knows demand for it will be sudden and huge.

With gasoline prices increasing along with concerns for the environment and demand for more and better transportation options, the day will come when Coloradans will ditch their SUVs and wonder why mass transit didn't happen - yesterday.

For now, Penny said, the coalition is working hard on the "non-sexy part." They're navigating the bureaucracies of federal, state and local governments; building relationships; developing consensus. "It's dealing with everything from the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Rail Authority to my bosses on the elected town council in Frisco."

Billions will be needed to address the I-70 problem, and a lot of political groundwork must be laid before any funds can be generated.

Still, for now, the mundane, short-term measures to reduce traffic problems on I-70 are all most of us will notice.

Penny said in addition to tougher chain laws, managing highway demand is one more way to provide immediate relief.

The coalition is urging resorts and lodging operations to provide financial incentives for visitors who ski mid-week. Trucking companies are being asked to limit transport during heavy traffic times, and Front Range employers are being encouraged to offer more flextime options.

With volume at the Eisenhower Tunnel routinely reaching 20,000 vehicles per day on weekends - more on holidays - something has to give. For now, it's us.

As we drove home Saturday afternoon, tired and ready to relax, we tried to imagine ourselves tossing our snowshoes on a luggage rack and riding a train home after a day in the mountains.

Cold beer and naps were vivid images.

We opened our eyes to real life: a sea of taillights all the way to Floyd Hill.

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