

I-70 Mountain Corridor Solutions: is reality dawning?

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Photo courtesy CDOT/ Officer Gulch section of I-70

CDOT continues to accumulate information to strengthen the case for solutions to the mounting I-70 mountain corridor congestion. The challenge involves the stretch of interstate highway cutting through the center of the state from Denver International Airport in the east through the Rocky Mountains to Glenwood Springs in the west. In a FAQ release from as far back as 2006, the state's transportation agency acknowledges spending between \$20 million and \$25 million just in studies of the problem and viable solutions. [http://www.i70mtncorridor.com/I70_FAQ_NEPA.asp] But, a breakthrough may have recently occurred as the various stakeholders represented in the 27-member committee known as the I-70 Corridor Collaborative Effort Team [http://www.dot.state.co.us/I70mtncorridor/i70css/PDF/CE_membership.pdf] have issued a statement known as the Consensus Recommendations. [http://www.dot.state.co.us/I70mtncorridor/i70css/PDF/Collaborative_Effort_Consensus_Recommendation.pdf] Many solutions have been debated at length for several years even as traffic flows have continued to build. The group includes city and town officials along the corridor, CDOT and county officials, federal agencies, corporate interests and private citizen groups like the Sierra Club. In the document, for the first time, is the acknowledgement that an elevated fixed guideway system should, indeed, be part of any plan. This comes as a relief to some in the mountain communities, like Harry Dale, a Clear Creek County commissioner. Mr. Dale expresses his concern on a web site, <http://www.i70mtncorridor-truth.com/home.html>, that simply widening several sections of the current roadway, installing smart sensors and message signs and adding time and toll restrictions could make travel in the mountains a nightmare until construction is projected to be completed in 2025.

Details of the guideway, based on a proven European design, may also be gleaned from this web site and provide some tantalizing details of the "monorail" system under consideration. This mass transit alternative could relieve some of the congestion up and down the roadway which, according to CDOT's own statistics, shows nearly 42,000 vehicles, including about 4,200 commercial vehicles, passing by the main Idaho Springs I-70 exit in Clear Creek County on average every day. The guideway may serve to safely and swiftly divert an estimated 10,000 passengers per hour from the roadway to and from their mountain destinations.

Using four wheels, two vertical load-bearing and two horizontal "guide wheels," the system would employ a new type of motor, the SERAPHIM, developed at Sandia National Laboratories near Albuquerque, New Mexico with no moving parts. The train would be moved by magnetic force, in some sections, at speeds in excess of 125 mph. At that rate, even with stops in between, the trip to Vail from DIA would take about an hour.

Tourism is the state's second largest industry and has factored prominently in the project's feasibility studies. But not only publicly held companies and their guests are affected, but also small towns and mountain communities along the way. The web site also provides economic details supporting the case for the guideway. At about \$23 million per mile, or \$4 billion, the system would cost about a third less than simply expanding the highway by one lane in each direction. In order to break even, the service would have to initially attract 5% of the current traffic. Projected break even occurs when it attracts 25 – 30% of the projected traffic growth for the corridor. While the guideway would be owned by the State of Colorado, the trains would be privately owned and operated. The system would require no subsidies to operate.

The Collaborative Effort Team's report represents a Tier 1 point in the process and puts it about half way toward implementation of solutions according to CDOT's process leading to a Tier 2 commitment to an actual identified preferred solution or solutions. That 2006 FAQ issued by the agency hoped for construction to begin by 2010. Now it looks like this or next year may be the agency's goal to reach a final Tier 2 solutions consensus to begin funding and implementation. The potential availability of federal stimulus bill funds may also be providing a small window of opportunity. The project is arguably the most important infrastructure commitment for the state whose impact will be felt by generations to come. But, if the care and imagination CDOT has taken in the past when faced with human and natural challenges such as the Glenwood Canyon section of the I-70 corridor, is any indication, the solution could be technically, economically and aesthetically dramatic as well as practical.