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Holiday trip? Look to I-70 messages for timely tip

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The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 09/03/2006 10:02:25 AM MDT

Motorists traveling to and from the high country on Interstate 70 this holiday weekend should look for trip-time information on electronic message signs between C-470 and Copper Mountain.

Colorado Department of Transportation engineers are tweaking an electronic messaging system that was first tested earlier this year, and this weekend's heavier-than-normal traffic will offer another good test of the technology, said CDOT spokesman Bob Wilson.

"There were a few bugs in it that they wanted to work out," he said.

The system uses ramp-metering equipment, radar devices and toll transponders to calculate speed, volume and highway segment data, CDOT said. It uses that information to post travel times between two points.

The electronic signs are about 15 miles apart - six on westbound I-70 and eight on the highway's eastbound lanes.

By early October, CDOT expects to have completed installation of ramp meters on entrances to eastbound I-70 at Empire Junction, Downieville and Idaho Springs East, Wilson said.

Ramp meters are traffic signals on entrance ramps that help relieve congestion by metering the flow of vehicles onto highway lanes.

While heavier congestion is expected this weekend, traffic at the Eisenhower Tunnel is not likely to set a record.

The weekend's busiest travel times might "break into the top 10" for tunnel- traffic volume, Wilson said, but they are not likely to eclipse the highest hourly volumes, many of which were recorded over the years in July and August.

A \$20 million environmental study of transportation improvements to address congestion in the corridor has dragged on for six years.

In late 2004, the study said widening I-70 along key segments in the mountains was the most economically feasible way of dealing with congestion. It would include new tunnel bores at the Eisenhower Tunnel and Twin Tunnels near Idaho Springs.

Yet the price tag of widening to a six-lane, 65 mph highway in locations is about \$2.65 billion, about \$1 billion more than CDOT expects to have for I-70 mountain improvements over the next 20 years.

Clear Creek County officials have opposed any focus on highway widening, fearing it would encroach on Clear Creek communities near the highway.

A coalition of mountain counties and cities in the I-70 corridor favors integrating mass-transit improvements with highway expansion.

CDOT soon will come out with final results of the environmental review, and state officials say any significant mass- transit alternative to highway widening will require billions of additional dollars.

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