

Mobile apps can help I-70 travelers plan, avoid traffic

CDOT and coalition herald new way to encourage drivers to patronize businesses during heavy traffic

NOVEMBER, 18 2011

CADDIE NATH

SUMMIT DAILY NEWS

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, CO COLORADO

Stuck in traffic? There's an app for that.

Or, at least, there will be, Colorado Department of Transportation officials say.

CDOT is preparing to commission the development of a smartphone application that will not only alert drivers to traffic conditions, delays, road conditions and potential travel times, but will provide them with specials and deals for places where they can eat, kill time and even spend the night while waiting for the roads to clear up.

Transportation officials hope to take what might eventually be a statewide application for a test drive on the Interstate 70 mountain corridor next year.

"What's really unique about the app is that we hope to have more predictive information on it," CDOT spokeswoman Stacey Stegman said. "In the past we've just been able to show you what's going on real time. (Now) we're gathering all this historical data to say, 'if I left at this time, it will take me an hour.' ... At least, people can have better information to plan their travel."

Once developed, CDOT's new app will be unique nationwide.

A contract for the product development will likely be awarded to a private firm early next year, with officials hoping to launch the app with live information on the I-70 corridor by Memorial Day, 2012.

"We'll have the summer travel season to work out any glitches for next winter," Stegman said.

If all goes as planned, the app will be developed and launched at no cost to the state, according to Stegman. The department will allow the contractor developing the app to come up with a working business model, through which advertising will pay for most of the costs.

"We're very much leaving it up to the private sector and their innovation," Stegman said. "We're hoping that ... by someone building the app, getting the information from us and being able to sell ads ... that they can have a financially viable project."

Competing apps

But the idea of using technology to offer discounts and deals to entice visitors to wait out traffic in the county rather than on the highway, for the benefit of both local businesses and the guest experience, is not a new one.

The I-70 Coalition, a partnership of governments along the corridor, has launched its own mobile application and a website to match, promoting business offerings to drivers who want to avoid the I-70 traffic jam on weekend afternoons.

"The coalition welcomes the partnership between its GoI70 project and the local business community, as everyone benefits," I-70 Coalition program manager Margaret Bowles stated in a recent release. "Local businesses get more customers, I-70 sees fewer cars during those peak travel times and our visitors avoid frustrating delays."

Local businesses owners are already on board with the idea, saying mobile applications are both popular and effective with guests and target a definite need among their customer base.

"When the customers are here, they're always asking, 'is the road open, is the road open,'" said Rick Tork, who manages the Backcountry Brewery in Frisco. "I think that (an application) would be a beneficial tool for stranded motorists."

Management at Rita's Taco Bar and Kenosha Steakhouse, jointly owned restaurants on Main Street in Breckenridge, is already beginning to explore business possibilities connected with smartphone technology, with positive results.

"We're interested in things like that," assistant general manager Margit McLoughlin said of CDOT's mobile app proposal. "We're one of the first (businesses) to do the QR readers. We're all about applications and technology."

The Go I-70 app specifically targets those visitors facing the frustrating weekend commute between Denver and the mountains. Ads featured on the website and mobile application need to apply Saturday and/or Sunday from 3-6 p.m.

CDOT's application, on the other hand, may someday include information relating to other heavily used corridors in the state, including those on Interstate 25.

"Our big picture is to really have this information available for any commuter highway, so that before anyone travels, they can truly explore all options," Stegman said. "And then it's also a good incentive program to try to get people off the roads at the most congested times."

<http://www.postindependent.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20111118/VALLEYNEWS/111119873/1081/RSS&template=printart>