



Mountain towns unite (sort of)

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Several prominent lines in the sand were adopted during a two-day meeting last week in what may be a compromise about the future of Interstate 70 from Denver west into the mountains.

The consensus is that "pinch points" where traffic stacks up on I-70 between Denver and Summit County should be addressed during the next 20 years, and in incremental fashion - tackling first one and then the next, as necessary - and ahead of time.

By common consent, the most distressing pinchpoint is the segment from Floyd Hill to Idaho Springs, where the twin tunnels, a series of slow-moving curves and the exits to the casinos of Black Hawk and Central City conspire to bottleneck traffic.

Beyond, the group sees modifying Georgetown Hill, removing the port of entry at Downieville, and a boring a third tunnel through the Continental Divide, among other modifications.

A sore wound

A point of contention is I-70 through Idaho Springs. Residents there - generally backed by other mountain communities - have drawn a line in the sand, saying they will continue to oppose widening, although not necessarily more lanes. That leaves open the possibility of a vertical alignment, similar to what is found in Glenwood Canyon, or a cut-and-cover tunnel-type configuration.

Clear Creek County sees I-70 as a sore wound. Residents there think the highway, when it was built in the 1960s and 1970s, was designed with a too-small budget, with repercussions that continue to offend.

For example, some mine tailings were paved over, leaving pollution problems that now cannot easily be remediated. Also, the highway drowns out conversations, produces possibly dangerous air pollution and is considered ugly.

The obvious comparison is with Vail Pass and Glenwood Canyon, which were later segments of I-70. Because of formal opposition, state highway engineers spent more money designing a less intrusive highway. The results in both cases were award winning.

As a first condition for future work, Clear Creek County representatives - backed up by other mountain communities - want past mistakes remedied. Beyond, they insist future projects be held to higher standards to minimize environmental impacts and reduce deterioration in the quality of life.

"I think those concerns are justified," says Larry Brooks, Avon's town manager.

No Greyhounds

Will there be enough money left after these other projects are first tackled to undertake a major project through Idaho Springs? That is by no means certain.

State officials predict with confidence a budget of only \$1.6 billion for I-70 west from Denver during the next 20 years, although issuing bonds - as was done to finance the T-REX project in southeast Denver - could boost the up-front budget to \$4 billion.

But mountain communities see expansion to six lanes from Floyd Hill to the Continental Divide as the final phase of automobile transportation for I-70. Beyond that - and possibly before some of these widening projects - the consensus is that mass transit must become the answer. This line in the sand is roughly drawn for 2025.

But what kind of mass transit makes sense is the great unknown. Rail-based buses, the Colorado Department of Transportation's vision of an interim mass transit solution, has been met with a collective yawn and general "are they serious?" rolling of the eyes. Unlike anything that resembles a Greyhound bus, according to this opinion, mass transit must be "alluring."

And, according to summit delegates, some state money must be spent in defining that alluring mass-transit answer even as money is spent blasting new tunnels.

The Colorado Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration have final say, and a formal decision expected in May 2006. However, Jeff Kullman, the state's project director, said he was heartened by the consensus of Eagle, Summit, and Clear Creek counties.

"They made it very clear that they see (I-70) as both a highway and a (mass) transit facility. That's good," Kullman said.

Having a unified vision could aid the corridor communities in dislodging money from state and federal coffers in coming years. Such was the case with \$1.6 billion T-REX, where construction had been expected to drag on for 20 years. Instead, it will be completed in five years, because cities and counties had reached key agreements and were ready when federal money unexpectedly became available.

Mass-transit side effects

Kullman said the state will hand off some responsibilities to the 31 governments from Aspen to Granby, who are now formally connected in what is being called the I-70 Corridor Coalition. He sees the group working with the private sector in taking on tasks like reducing congestion during the busiest travel times, he said.

One idea discussed is to get trucks to use the highway during less-congested times. Regional truckers hotly respond that they already avoid congestion, because it costs them too much money.

As well, Kullman sees the corridor coalition becoming an effective lobbying group for state and federal funding, and for forging consensus about exactly what kind of mass transit makes sense. But he is dubious that I-70 corridor communities have thought through the implications of mass transit, he said.

Mass transit will induce even more population growth and development than is already expected, he warns.

There has been some discussion of additional funding sources, including tolls and the possibility of seeking constitutional authority for a statewide real estate transfer tax, with the proceeds to be spread across the state.

Bunch of 'kooks'

The ski industry has been relatively quiet, favoring the least-risk strategy of highway improvements while showing little enthusiasm so far for mass transit. Bill Jensen, chief executive officer for Vail Mountain, said he is among those who want a deliberate strategy to plan for mass transit.

"We're pragmatic as an organization that pavement, in the near term, is going to be a necessity. But at the meeting, I was very outspoken that we should do the studies that understand and preserve a mass transit link," Jensen said.

Whether mass transit could and should extend to Vail, or just end at Summit County, is another matter, he added.

Eagle County Commissioner Peter Runyon was pleased by the outcome. "I was surprised. I thought I was going to come in as a kook. But everybody else was a kook, too," said Runyon, a firm believer that alternatives must be found to auto culture.

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On the Web

<http://www.i70mtncorridor.com/>

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More on I-70

Check tomorrow's Vail Daily for a story on how mass transit systems like buses and monorails can cause communities to grow.

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Vail, Colorado

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