



New interstate coalition created to address highway problems

JANE STEBBINS

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SUMMIT COUNTY - Community leaders along the Interstate 70 corridor have long felt overlooked by the state Department of Transportation (CDOT).

They believe current highway improvement projects lack vision. They have stated that CDOT spends limited funds "just to be doing something."

They feel they aren't heard and that decisions are made before public input is sought. And they don't like CDOT's preferred alternative to address traffic congestion by boring a third tunnel in the Continental Divide and paving more lanes of asphalt.

Now, they have formed the I-70 Central Mountain Transportation Corridor Coalition to address those issues and get their voices heard.

"To bring groups together, you don't need a common purpose, you need a common enemy," said state Rep. Gary Lindstrom, who during his tenure as Summit County commissioner was a vocal opponent of the way CDOT does things. "The common enemy is the poor way our roads are managed and how our transportation has been planned."

At an inaugural meeting earlier this month, the new group of about 35 regional officials outlined four objectives to define the problems, address the issues, determine how the coalition should operate and identify a timeline for work.

The problems run the gamut, from insufficient funding to maintain infrastructure, developing better alternatives, involving the private sector, traffic noise and jams, a lack of coordination on projects that address congested areas and a lack of a unified voice from the mountain community.

Other problems the coalition sees include a lack of alternate transit on the interstate; a lack of concern on CDOT's behalf to sustain historic preservation, business survival and protect the environment; a lack of a regional airport that could alleviate congestion on the interstate; a lack of plans in the first phase to mitigate construction impacts; an unwillingness at the federal level to fund highway improvements and no statewide buy-in for a statewide problem.

Coalition members then decided they will develop a locally preferred alternative that will result in moving people and goods along the corridor with the least amount of negative social, economic and environmental impacts.

They believe they can do this by having a common voice comprised of all those municipalities and other interests in the corridor.

"That's the name of the game," Lindstrom said. "(Being heard) is the reason I-25 is being fixed right now; the part that's being fixed is between the state Capitol and Bill Owens' home in Arapahoe County."

Lindstrom cited the lack of a cohesive vision at a "listening forum" for the failure of the corridor counties to get what they need on I-70.

"(CDOT director) Tom Norton and (Federal Highway Administration director) Doug Jones did not hear our common voice," Lindstrom said. "They heard a lot of people talking, but they didn't hear everyone saying the same thing. Idaho Springs said one thing and Eagle County said something else. We need to stand up and say the same thing so we don't get ignored. We need to all stand up and say, 'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore.' Maybe we'll get someone's attention."

Then they must convince those outside the corridor that a locally preferred alternative is better than what CDOT is proposing and that what benefits the mountains will benefit the entire state.

"We went through the Major Investment Study in 1995 to 1997, the PEIS (Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement) from 1997 to 2004," Lindstrom said. "CDOT has spent \$20 million so far just for consultants and their answer is adding lanes and tunnels. We (corridor counties) felt we should come up with our own alternative."

The choice could include suggesting alternative transportation, rerouting the highway to avoid environmental damage, and promoting travel demand management, which essentially encourages drivers to use the highway during off-peak hours.

To implement it all, the coalition plans to include in its group people who have strong educational and lobbying skills, develop a marketing plan aimed at locals and Front Range residents and include representatives of the ski industry and the business community.

After years of complaining about CDOT, Lindstrom isn't sure of the extent his role as state representative should play in the coalition.

"I hope my being in the state Legislature is going to increase the amount of attention central Colorado counties get," he said. "I'm not sure I want to be a leader in a local issue. It's going to be difficult to ignore, but I think it's something I have to do."

Jane Stebbins can be reached at (970) 668-3998, ext. 228, or jstebbins@summitdaily.com.

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