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guest commentary

Think of Olympic-sized congestion

By Rob Witwer

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When Gov. Bill Ritter announced recently that he hoped to lure the 2018 Olympic Winter Games to Colorado, it brought to mind another governor, Richard Lamm, who got himself elected by opposing the very same thing in 1972.

But Ritter's announcement brought something else to mind, too: traffic. There's currently no plan to improve the state's transportation infrastructure, especially on Interstate 70. Unless this changes, the Olympic idea will make a bad situation worse on this already strained stretch of highway.

With sound planning, the Games could be a boon not only to our economy but also to our international stature. With its incredible natural beauty, Colorado is uniquely positioned to offer one of the best Olympic venues in history.

In the absence of a plan to improve infrastructure, however, talking about the Olympics now is a bit like breaking out the frosting before baking the cake.

The proposed Games would presumably rely on the I-70 corridor, so any conversation needs to start with a simple question: Does an unimproved I-70 have the capacity to handle even more traffic in the next decade than could otherwise be expected

through typical growth patterns? Probably not.

Most folks think we're past capacity now, even before the Olympics proposal. A 2007 study by the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce concluded that I-70 congestion costs Colorado nearly \$1 billion each year, to say nothing of the frustration experienced by drivers stuck in increasingly frequent traffic jams.

But if you think congestion is bad now, imagine what will happen if we do nothing. Imagine the traffic that would be generated in the run-up to the Games, not to mention the Games themselves. Think of the bustle of activity before the Beijing Games, and compress it into the I-70 corridor between Golden and Dillon. Visualize tail lights.

It's questionable whether Colorado could even mount a credible run under existing conditions. Do we really believe the International Olympic Committee would favor a location with such overburdened infrastructure? Traffic problems would be painfully evident on the IOC's first site visit.

And even if courting the Olympics helps bring federal highway dollars, there must first be consensus among local communities about what to do with them, which currently isn't the case. Coming up with a plan isn't just good public policy; it also would make Colorado a more attractive bidder for the Games.

There was a plan on the ballot this year to direct more dollars to I-70 without raising taxes or fees. Amendment 52 would have allocated \$90 million next year and as much as \$1 billion in the next decade to state highways, with a special emphasis on I-70 congestion. With the governor's opposition, the initiative failed, leaving the state without options in the foreseeable future.

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Amendment 52 showed that it's possible to address Colorado's infrastructure shortcomings without new taxes or fees. This is critical, because in a down economy, asking citizens to approve another tax increase is a non-starter (the failure of Amendments 58 and 59 proved that). And with all due respect to those who propose tolling drivers on I-70, charging people to use lanes they've already paid for is bad public policy.

Colorado citizens face a host of challenges. With mounting job losses and tumbling home prices, finding dollars to improve transportation infrastructure will be harder than ever. Before we start talking about bringing more traffic to the I-70 corridor, let's talk about whether we have capacity to handle it. Specifically, what is our plan to identify a secure, long-term source of funding for Colorado's infrastructure?

That conversation needs to be held now, whether or not we host the Olympics in 2018.

Rob Witwer is the outgoing state representative for House District 25.

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