



Rail option for I-70, I-25 heats up

\$20 billion needed for I-70, I-25 rail lines; design could begin next year

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SUMMIT COUNTY — Although most of the work on I-70 has been behind the scenes recently, a group advocating for a rail corridor through the mountains is shifting into higher gear.

Timeline for road, rail construction

- The description of the I-70 improvements will be legally completed in 2010.
 - Smaller highway improvement projects may start as soon as 2011.
 - Major highway improvements may begin in 2017.
 - If determined to be feasible, rail design could begin for our segment of I-70 as soon as 2010 and, if financing is secured, construction could begin between 2015-2020.
- Source - I-70 coalition

The Rocky Mountain Rail Authority held a meeting late last week to discuss its final version of a report that details the cost of building and operating rail lines along the I-70 corridor, as well as a Front Range line, paralleling I-25.

The report includes schematic drawings of the system, including stops at Keystone and Frisco. The study focuses on proven technologies that could be ready for operation by 2020.

According to the draft version of the report, the east-west line from DIA to the Eagle County airport would cost about \$15 billion. The north-south Fort Collins to Pueblo line would cost another \$5 billion.

As always, the biggest question mark is finding the money, but the rail authority board makes the case that the rail lines would enhance Colorado's overall transportation network at a time of rising oil prices and growing congestion.

About 80 percent of the funding would have to come from federal sources, with the rest generated from a combination of state, local and private funds. In particular, the rail authority is looking to the federal government for infrastructure grants, citing the importance of the I-70 corridor as an "economic engine" for Colorado.

Another committee?

Rail planning could be helped by creation of a new state advisory committee on rail and transit. Earlier this year, the State Legislature created a new division of transit and rail within the Colorado Department of Transportation.

The new division has the authority to promote, plan, design, build, finance, operate, maintain and contract for transit services including bus, passenger rail and advanced guideway systems services in the state.

"The creation of the Division of Transit and Rail will allow Colorado to be more focused and strategic in its planning of transit systems," said State Sen. Suzanne Williams, co-sponsor of the bill.

The new division within the Department of Transportation could help shift the bureaucratic balance away from highways, toward a true multi-modal outlook, said Dr. Flo Raitano, director of the I-70 coalition.

One of the big challenges is integrating the work of the rail authority with the ongoing programmatic study for I-70, Raitano said, explaining that it's not an either-or scenario. The long-term solution will involve both improvements to the existing highway, as well as a transit component, she said.

"Transit is not going to address all the issues out there," Raitano said, explaining critical highway improvements are needed sooner rather than later.

The rail study nearing completion is aimed at establishing what can realistically be done in terms of mass

transit.

"They wanted to see what's really feasible out there. Now we're at a point where we can say, wow, there really are a couple of options that are feasible ... OK, so rail does make sense for the state of Colorado," Raitano said. "Now, we really need to get serious about the alignment and technology ... it's a marathon race with hurdles."

Acknowledging public frustration with the slow pace of progress on highway improvements, I-70 coalition chairman Michael Penny recently outlined a potential timeline for work. If state and federal agencies can finish up their programmatic study on schedule in 2010, some smaller highway improvement projects could start in 2011, with major work to begin in 2017.

"There are no silver bullets or easy answers to this corridor," Penny wrote in an update for the I-70 Coalition website. "This corridor serves as an interstate highway, a tourist avenue, and as our local road ... The solutions are complex and costly. This all adds up to taking the time to make the right decisions, following the correct legal procedures, finding the right funding mechanisms, and designing and construction the solution in a way which minimizes the social, economic, historic, and environmental impacts," he explained.

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