

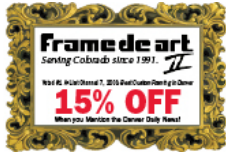
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Is rail the solution to I-70 mountain traffic?

Newest CDOT study advocated an 'advanced guideway system'

Gene Davis, DDN Staff Writer

Tuesday, September 14, 2010

The newest study on proposed improvements to the Interstate 70 mountain corridor argues that an advanced guideway system such as an elevated, high-speed rail line should play a central part in relieving traffic congestion for the area in the future.

Meanwhile, anti-rail advocates maintain that the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) is on the wrong track by recommending an advanced guideway system.

The preferred alternative detailed in the Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement released Friday argues that building a new advanced guideway system, along with widening the highway, would help increase capacity and mobility while decreasing congestion to destinations along the I-70 Mountain Corridor. If nothing is done, weekend travel time on the corridor in 2035 is expected to be approximately three times higher than it is today, according to CDOT.

Pricey

But implementing a rail system and widening the highway would help make the preferred option cost up to \$20 billion. CDOT acknowledges in the study that the state does not have enough money to fund those improvements and is looking for other sources for money — including private/public partnerships, tolling and bonding/loans — to help fund the project.

CDOT promises to fund studies to determine the viability of an

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elevated transit system along the mountain corridor. The transit system would provide service for approximately 118 miles from the Eagle County Regional Airport to the C-470 intersection. The rail system would require new tunnel bores at both the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnels and the Twin Tunnels.

CDOT had previously eliminated the idea of implementing an advanced guideway system because they originally put a \$4 billion cap on potential improvements to the corridor. But following an outcry from stakeholders, CDOT embarked on a “lengthy process” to come to an agreement with the stakeholders that resulted in the recommendation of an advanced guideway system.

Bad idea?

Randal O’Toole of the Independence Institute, a Golden-based libertarian think tank, believes an advanced guideway system such as rail is a bad idea because it would cost a lot of money while not relieving traffic congestion. He doesn’t think many people would use a rail line because it’s “inconvenient, a lot more expensive and É not faster at all” compared to roads.

“You’re substituting an expensive, inconvenient slow technology for a convenient fast cheap technology and it’s just not going to work,” he said.

Meanwhile, Kevin O’Malley É the chairman of the Clear Creek County Board of County Commissioners who has been involved with working on the future of I-70 for about six years É said he supports building an advanced guideway system because it is projected to last for more than 75 years. Adding extra lanes, on the other hand, would do little to combat congestion after five years, he added.

“I think that it’s time that we in the United States start thinking a little bit more about the long term,” he said.

Danny Katz of the Colorado Public Interest Research Group (CoPIRG) added that an advanced guideway system is “one more step in coming up with a comprehensive solution to a problem that everyone in Colorado has had a personal experience with.” He believes plenty of people would utilize a rail line through the mountains and that the transit system would be economically sustainable after it is built.

The Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement follows 10 years of studies and deliberation. CDOT Spokeswoman Stacey Stegman said it’s taken so long to offer a plan because the mountain corridor is “unique and critical to so many groups.”

She pointed out that the I-70 mountain corridor effects everyone from trade and commerce and freight traffic to snowboarders looking to get away for the weekend.

The Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement is a first step towards improving the I-70 mountain corridor.

The statement is available online at I70MTNCorridor.com. CDOT is holding public hearings on the proposed preferred

alternative Oct. 5-7 in Summit, Clear Creek and Eagle counties. Improving the I-70 mountain corridor has long been a hot-button issue for lawmakers, community members and state leaders. During the past legislative session, Sen. Chris Romer, D-Denver, proposed installing a “zipper lane” that would reduce traffic on the highway during peak hours. Zipper lanes would use movable barriers to create three eastbound lanes and one westbound lane on I-70 during peak traffic hours.

A bill proposed by Romer and passed by the Legislature encourages the Colorado Department of Transportation to study the use of zipper lanes. According to the Colorado News Agency, the zipper lanes would be implemented in the fall of 2011 and at the earliest, if it comes to fruition at all.

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