

# Vail Daily

## Neighboring railroads inspire I-70 group

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Mountain communities hold conference on freeway traffic

**Bob Berwyn**  
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COPPER MOUNTAIN — Although the idea of mass transit along Interstate 70 may still seem like pie-in-the-sky stuff, a pair of neighboring states have aggressively pushed ahead with their own plans to deal with traffic in urbanized areas.

Thursday, project managers for New Mexico's Rail Runner system and the Utah Transit Authority outlined their efforts at the Copper Mountain workshop of the I-70 Coalition, an alliance of mountain communities working on ways to upgrade the freeway.

A coalition of mountain towns trying to deal with traffic on I-70 have sought ideas from commuter rails in New Mexico and Utah.  
**Preston Utley/Daily file photo**



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Government leadership and the participation of the business community were crucial to designing and executing transit plans in both cases. Between Albuquerque to Santa Fe, Gov. Bill Richardson put some of his political capital behind the commuter rail, said Rail Runner project manager Chris Blewett.

“He (Richardson) said, ‘I’m going to have the first phase of this done in two years.’ It was the most important statement he could have made,” Blewett said.

“A lot of people thought this was crazy ... People kept saying, ‘You can’t do this.’ We didn’t accept any of the conventional wisdom. We kept saying, ‘Why not?’” Blewett said. “There was a lot of skepticism. People say nothing ever gets done in New Mexico. That may have worked to our advantage.”

The first phase of the project, between Belen and Albuquerque, was completed in just more than two years, just slightly behind the schedule announced by Richardson, Blewett said.

“We had no public process and not a single intergovernmental agreement, we didn’t do ridership projections, and we had only three budget meetings in two-and-a-half years,” Blewett said. “We tried to make this thing believable and real.

“We tried to adopt a European attitude,” Blewett said. “This isn’t about today. This is about New Mexico’s future.”

Dillon Mayor Barbara Davis said the I-70 Coalition could take a page from the New Mexico playbook by trying not to get too bogged down in the process and losing sight of the long-term goal.

Along Utah’s Wasatch Front, squeezed in between the mountains and the Great Salt Lake, transportation is the backbone of the state’s economy, said Steve Meyer, engineering and construction manager for the Utah Transit Authority.

About 80 percent of the state's population lives in the corridor and the movement of goods constitutes a \$100 billion per year industry, Meyer explained.

Meyer said winning over the private sector was key to moving ahead with the mass transit project in the corridor, where ridership is already double the projected level.

Meyer said the state transit agency took a bare-bones, no frills approach — for example buying used railroad cars from other areas. The Utah rail system will serve demand equivalent to an entire lane on I-15, he said.

“It shows you can get it done,” Vail Town Manager Stan Zemler said. “We need to cut the same path and not accept no.”

Zemler said the coalition has to keep an eye on the I-70 study now being conducted by the Colorado Department of Transportation.

“We have to get a transit corridor secured and a commitment to transit,” Zemler said.

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