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July 10, 2007

Q & A with I-70 Coalition members

by Kimberly Nicoletti
HCBR

May 14, 2007

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Eric Turner is an executive board member on the I-70 Coalition.

Mark Fox

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The players Flo Raitano became interested in serving as the director of the I-70 Coalition because it's such an important matter.

“(It) is extremely important to the future of the corridor, the state of Colorado and the economy,” she said. “There were a lot of bright, creative, innovative thinkers working on the coalition. It's got a very steep learning curve, and I have this urge to be always learning new things.”

Frisco Mayor Bernie Zurbruggen nominated Michael Penny to be the chair of the I-70 Coalition and the membership elected him. During the past few months, he has worked with State Rep. Dan Gibbs on his chain-law bill. He also has focused on running the board of directors and full coalition meetings, further educating himself on issues surrounding the Interstate 70 corridor and transportation issues in general and building relationships with new Colorado Department of Transportation Director Russ George and other government officials associated with the I-70 Programmatic Environmental Impact Study. Penny was recently appointed to Gov. Bill Ritter's Transportation Finance and Implementation Blue Ribbon Panel.

“A major focus through the end of the year will be determining a long-term, viable revenue stream, which maintains our existing transportation infrastructure while addressing our state's future multi-modal transportation needs,” Penny said.

Eric Turner is the past president of the Summit County Chamber of Commerce and is now on the executive board of the I-70 Coalition. He grew up in Summit County and hopes to find a solution to the congestion so his kids don't have to face the same problem

Which alternative do you personally support and why?

Eric Turner, executive board member: We, as the I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition, have come up with a consensus preferred alternative. It involves multiple modes, strategic highway repairs and improvements and ultimately recognizes that high-speed transit must be concurrently planned and implemented with all the rest.

Personally, I would like to see transit sooner rather than later, but I am concerned about rushing into something just because it is faster or less expensive. I feel strongly that we should try to look for long-term solutions rather than the quickest or cheapest fix that gets passed on to the next generation. When I was growing up here in Summit County, our parents were talking about I-70 congestion. I don't want my kids to



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be dealing with this in another 30 years.

Based on the summary of impact on I-70 congestion, its impact on Colorado totals \$839 million per year in 2005 dollars. Meanwhile, construction costs continue to rise. What kind of time frame are the Colorado Department of Transportation and the coalition
Turner: The important factor is that the decisions made by CDOT today will guide the process for decades to come. The study has been done and is in draft form. We are all awaiting the final draft release for public comment.

In the meantime, the I-70 Coalition has been working on immediate travel demand management steps, which can potentially help the issue, as well as planning for a potential future transit component. Travel demand management is a series of tactics, which would change driver behaviors and traffic flow to redistribute some traffic from peak times to nonpeak times.

Flo Raitano, coalition director: CDOT is looking to undertake construction in 2015, at the earliest. The reason for that is availability of at least some level of funding for those improvements. The coalition would like to see the start date for capacity enhancements start much sooner than 2015 but also has been urging CDOT to consider planning improvements that will accommodate growth and demographic trends for the state through at least 2058.

Michael Penny, coalition chair: We certainly hope that a final decision can be made within the next six months. As far as construction, we all need to realize that this project is not an island unto itself — its funding is tied to how the state of Colorado prioritizes transportation improvements across the state. The magnitude of the I-70 improvements costs (\$8 billion for public transit and \$4 billion for road improvements) will require us to work with both the state and federal governments.

What will Gov. Ritter accomplish by re-examining recommendations for the I-70 corridor?

Turner: Hopefully Gov. Ritter and CDOT Director (Russell) George will accept the recommendations of the I-70 Coalition and integrate them in to the final (Environmental Impact Statement). Until the coalition got involved, CDOT had all but eliminated any possibility other than six lanes of highway as the final solution.

Raitano: Gov. Ritter also has announced his new energy economy initiative. Stepping back and re-examining the I-70 recommendations will allow the governor to take a look at how potential solutions on this corridor fit in with his goals for more energy-efficient and environmentally friendlier transportation options.

Penny: By re-examining the current recommendation for the I-70 corridor, we all hope that a unified solution can be agreed upon. In order for us to be successful in gaining funding and support for this project, we must all be on the same page and ask for the funding with one voice.

Obviously, funding is an issue. Where does the coalition see the money coming from?

Turner: There is no easy answer to the funding. In my opinion, there will need to be some sort of public-private partnership for construction and operation of any transit system in order for it to be successful. There will also need to be creative sources of public funding. Today, highway projects are funded by the Federal Highway Administration. The idea of a multimodal system opens up the possibilities for potential funding. Complex problems require complex solutions, and as with anything worthwhile, we will all have to play a part either through some sort of transit tax or other state funding source.

Raitano: The good news is that statewide transportation funding is one of the primary tasks that Gov. Ritter's Blue Ribbon Transportation Panel has been asked to address, and he has indicated that everything is on the table for consideration. Our I-70 Coalition Chair, Michael Penny, is a member of the panel. Colorado has ignored the very real costs of maintaining and enhancing its transportation network for too long, and now the bill is coming due.

Penny: The magnitude of I-70 improvements costs and the fact that it is an interstate highway means that we will work with every major stakeholder who uses the highway in any fashion from the local level to the national level.

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