

A step back on I-70?

CDOT to re-evaluate alternatives for highway plans

BY BOB BERWYN

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SUMMIT COUNTY - Bringing in a facilitator to smooth the way for a solution to I-70 congestions could postpone the choice of a final plan for six to nine months.

In the long run, the latest delay may save time to gain buy-in from major stakeholders in the process, Frisco town manager and I-70 coalition chair Michael Penny said regarding last week's announcement to hire a facilitator who will work with various stakeholders to try and find some common ground.

"I don't see it as a slow-down," Penny said, explaining that it's a pro-active step that could help avert a future legal battle that could delay any construction on the corridor for years.

At issue is a long-term Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) plan for the stretch of interstate between Golden and Glenwood Springs. The route is plagued by congestion at peak travel times, and the state agency, along public and private stakeholders along the corridor, have spent the past few years developing the voluminous plan.

A final decision was expected this summer. Now, Penny said he expects to see a determination made sometime during the next year.

The 'preferred alternative'

In a draft version, CDOT selected a preferred alternative that called for adding new lanes along much of the route, along with the preservation of a right-of-way for a future mass transit system. That option didn't sit well with all the members I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition, particularly the Clear Creek contingent, who are concerned about potentially debilitating impacts to their communities as well as the rest of the corridor from years and years of highway construction.

At the same time, some of the resort communities and the ski resort companies support highway widening as vital their own interests. Trying to bring those disparate interests under one tent will be the big challenge for the facilitator, said I-70 coalition director Flo Raitano.

"I see it at as (CDOT director) Russ George honoring his commitment to the coalition to enhance the public process," Raitano said, adding that public access maybe wasn't as extensive as it could have been early on.

"I think they (CDOT) are still committed to six lanes in some areas at some time," Raitano continued. "But (George) really wants to make sure this is an open process. He wants to make sure that people don't think the process was cooked or pre-ordained. He wants to undo that perception," she added, explaining the rationale

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for going back and taking another look at the full range of 16 to 18 alternatives with an open mind.

"They want to avoid another Glenwood Canyon," Raitano said, referring to the bitter battle over the alignment of the highway between Gypsum and Glenwood Springs through the scenic Colorado River gorge.

Perhaps most importantly, Gov. Ritter and his administration decided to hold the discussions without imposing the \$4 billion cap that was seen as a key limiting factor during the past few years.

That doesn't mean there is any more money available today, but the latest evaluation of an I-70 plan should be seen in the context of the overall transportation funding discussions taking place at the state level, Penny said.

"I-70 is just a drop in the bucket in the state's (transportation) needs," Penny concluded.

Bob Berwyn can be reached at (970) 331-5996, or at bberwyn@summitdaily.com.

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