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### Staring at I-70 with tunnel vision

Leader of Vail HOA goes underground in effort to cut noise

By Deborah Frazier, Rocky Mountain News

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Ken Papaleo © News

#### Correction

This story should have said that the longest roadway tunnel in the world is the 15.2-mile Laerdal Tunnel in Norway.

VAIL - Jim Lamont has a \$6 billion dream to eliminate the noise created by Interstate 70's path through this internationally renowned resort town.

Lamont, a former Vail town planner and now head of the Vail Village Homeowners Association, is promoting a privately financed \$3 billion tunnel under Vail Mountain that would bypass the town.

And, he's proposing a \$3 billion second phase that would bury I-70 through town and then develop the newly created 550 acres.

"It would benefit everyone in Vail because the tunnel bypasses Vail and eliminates the noise and pollution," Lamont said. "It's either-or, or both."

Investors would pay for the \$3 billion tunnel, where tolls would be collected to repay them, he said.

Burying I-70, which would require its own mountain of state and federal approvals, would create new residential, retail and commercial opportunities that would also help pay investors, he said.

The multibillion-dollar, privately financed construction would be a joke elsewhere in Colorado, but not in Vail, Lamont said.

"People in Vail speak in billions," he said. "Property ownership in Vail goes to the heart of the capitalistic system in America."

Lamont wouldn't reveal the names of investors that he said are interested in the project.

### Old idea, seasoned critics

Similar proposals to bury the heavily traveled interstate that bisects Vail or to tunnel around the town date back to the early 1970s and Colorado's potential bid for the Winter Olympics.

The idea of covering I-70 arose again in the 1980s, as noise levels rose. In 1993, private developers approached the town of Vail, but officials declined to fund the studies.

"There's nothing this community would enjoy more than having I-70 disappear from our sight and our ears. And ears are the big thing," said Kaye Ferry, executive director of the Vail Chamber & Business Association.

"You can't sit on your deck in the summer because of the noise," she said. "I play golf, which should be peaceful, but the noise is outrageous."

Jim Lamont, executive director of the Vail Village Homeowners Association, dreams big - \$6 billion big. To eliminate traffic noise from Interstate 70 in the resort community, he envisions a privately financed tunnel under Vail Mountain and burying the interstate where it passes through town.

Ferry said trucks downshifting interrupt audiences at the town's summer music festivals.

"It's really a summer problem because no one has air conditioning and everyone wants to open their windows," she said.

Lamont's proposals would be privately funded because the noise that annoys Vail residents isn't a priority for federal and state highway funds, she said.

"It would be nice to wave a magic wand and get rid of it without any cost, but I don't see it," Ferry said. "The kids who work up here say it's just rich people whining."

Lamont said he's also gotten a chilly reception from town officials, which would have to endorse the project before it could win state and federal approval.

"It's important to have people like Jim Lamont, who is a futurist of sorts, who think outside the box," said Stan Zemler, Vail's town manager.

"There is a lot of concern about noise. It always comes up on resident surveys," he said. "But we're not going to make it go away. It's a reality of I-70."

Zemler said potential investors have privately calculated the costs of burying part of I-70 to see if development on the top would pay the costs, but there's been nothing proposed.

"Jim's trying to get momentum going, but it would take a lot to get the town of Vail on board," Zemler said. "It's already been studied."

"There could be some possibilities there, but with private money."

Lamont agreed.

"Vail people are savvy enough to seek a solution without using tax dollars because using tax dollars would send the wrong message," he said.

## European models

Two years ago, Lamont and Vail's Public Works Director Greg Hall toured Europe to look at the multitude of highway tunnels.

For instance, the longest tunnel in the world is the 10.2-mile St. Gotthard Tunnel between Switzerland and Italy, which opened in 1980 and was publicly financed.

"In Europe, they finance most tunnels with a higher gas tax," Hall said. "Here, the question is, how much development does it take to pay for something?"

Hall said he saw examples of covered highways throughout Europe, including several built in avalanche and rock-fall zones.

In the United States, the "air rights" over a federal highway would have to be acquired and a series of environmental permits issued before it could be buried, Hall said.

The proposed tunnel would burrow under U.S. Forest Service land and require other permits, he said.

"There would be a lot of hoops," Hall said. "The question is, would the opportunity be worth the cost and who would pay for it?"

Neil Gray, director of governmental affairs for the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, said privately funded tunnels and bridges are rare in the States.

Federal and state money built Boston's controversial "Big Dig," a \$14.6 billion project that included bridges, tunnels and

covering highways to let traffic bypass the city, he said. A few sections have tolls.

"It was way overbudget and heavily politicized, but it's a good transportation system," Gray said.

The Big Dig, planned in the late 1980s as a \$4 billion project, was the last of the great interstate projects, Gray said.

Last year, a section of ceiling in a Big Dig tunnel fell and killed a passenger in a car, resulting in an investigation of the contractor, he said.

He said Florida, Texas, Arkansas and other states had smaller and far-less-expensive projects that involved tolls, but federal funds paid most of the costs.

Gray said he couldn't estimate what how large a toll would be required for a privately financed tunnel under Vail Mountain.

"It's like asking me how many peanuts and jelly beans would fit in my refrigerator, and you don't know the size of the refrigerator," he said.

In Colorado, toll roads have had mixed success.

While the E-470 toll road around the eastern metro area has met expenses and has expanded, revenue from the 11-mile Northwest Parkway that extends E-470 has fallen short of projections.

"The Vail project would involve major amounts of money, but the financing could be for 50 years or longer," Lamont said.

## **CDOT's dreams differ**

Lamont said he'd welcome local, state and federal partners on the project, but says it's unlikely.

He's right.

"I-70 through Vail isn't a high-priority area for us," said Ed Fink of the Colorado Department of Transportation.

"We would not put any money into covering I-70 through Vail. As for the tunnel, we would not work directly with a private developer. The proposal would have to come from the town."

The town commissioned a geological feasibility study in 2005, but it has never reviewed the findings, Lamont and Zemler said.

The report wasn't released until last month, in part, because Vail is part of the I-70 Mountain Corridor Coalition, a group of local governments looking at alternatives to improve traffic along the route from Golden to Grand Junction.

CDOT may spend up to \$4 billion in federal funds on several projects along the corridor, Fink said.

The route through Vail isn't on the list of potential projects, he said. And, Fink said, a privately funded project was a long shot.

"I doubt they could get the tunnel done for \$3 billion. It's the length of five Eisenhower tunnels," he said. The electric bill for the 1.7-mile Eisenhower Tunnel is \$1 million a year, he said.

"It's not impossible, but it's akin to climbing Mount Everest," Fink said.

## **Traffic to double**

Fink said he noticed a renewed local interest in the tunnel through Vail Mountain and burying I-70 after a sinkhole closed the interstate for about a week in 2003.

"They found out just how quiet it was when the road was closed, and that's when we started getting calls about the noise," Fink said.

Traffic on I-70 through Vail averages 23,400 vehicles per day. Fink said the average daily traffic could more than double by 2025.

Vail City Councilman Greg Moffet said he'd like to see the council look seriously at Lamont's proposal because financial and political circumstances could change.

"All sorts of things get funding in Washington, D.C.," he said. "At the bottom of it all, if you don't ask, you don't get."

Lamont is well aware of the opposition and the barriers to his proposals, but he said Vail's property values are based on its environment.

"In development and real-estate circles here, people know that Vail has nothing else to sell but its environment, and they'll take steps to protect that environment," Lamont said.

[frazierd@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:frazierd@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-5308

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