

## Summit County storms stymie officials, motorists

Local and state agencies seek to avoid repeating holiday I-70 closure  
 BY ASHLEY DICKSON  
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- Summit Daily/Mark Fox

SUMMIT COUNTY — The scenario is nothing new: A winter blizzard rolls in during a busy holiday weekend, forcing the closure of Interstate 70 and leaving motorists stranded with very little information.

A little more than a week after heavy Thanksgiving weekend traffic turned the highway into an icy parking lot, officials once again are scrambling for solutions before the brunt of winter sets in and more closures are inevitable.

"Every storm is different, and timing is a crucial factor in the decision to close the road," said CDOT deputy superintendent Don Miller. "You can either have accidents or be proactive and make the decision to close the road at a location where people will still have access to services."

But local officials — and many angry motorists — are calling for better communication to help them avoid being stranded in the first place.

Big weekend, big problems

Thanksgiving weekend brought an influx of visitors to Summit County, and come Sunday afternoon, the lines to get back on the interstate were backed up along Highway 9 and Highway 6, paralyzing the county's roadways.

"In my seven years in the county, I have never seen more vehicles trying to get up to the tunnel," said Colorado State Patrol Capt. Ron Prater. "This was really about sheer volume, and people in cars simply could not navigate up the hill."

At about 3:50 p.m., CDOT officials decided to close Vail Pass, and with traffic backing up at an astonishing rate, the Silverthorne interchange was closed shortly after 4 p.m. Although CDOT has installed message boards along the corridor to inform drivers of estimated travel times, the only message broadcasted on Sunday was one to warn drivers of winter weather, which was already obvious to most stuck on the highway.

"We try to keep driver informed as much as possible," Miller said. "We always try to give drivers an idea of what they are up against, but there is only so much we can put on those boards."

Many drivers refused to give in to Mother Nature, pushing their vehicles up towards the tunnel in the blowing snow only to end up in snowbanks and in need of a tow. Unprepared truckers were also caught off-guard.

"People don't appreciate or evaluate the conditions they are going to encounter when they drive the corridor in the winter," Prater said. "Some people were just abandoning their cars on the side of the road."

CDOT reported 58 heavy tows throughout the holiday weekend, a startling figure given the amount of time it takes to tow away just a single vehicle.

Seeking shelter

Stranded motorists forced to wait out the storm were directed to the Silverthorne Recreation Center shortly after CDOT closed the road. Within 90 minutes, the shelter was at capacity.

"We had 700 people hit the shelter between 5:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.," said Summit County emergency manager Joel Cochran, adding that the mass of people prompted the American Red Cross to open a second shelter at the Silverthorne Elementary School. "At 7 p.m. people were lined up and waiting at the school."

County emergency officials dubbed the holiday closure "Frozen Turkey," and local authorities tried their best to pacify frustrated motorists, even though there was no information about when the road would re-open.

"We don't estimate when the road will re-open because then that just traps us in a box," Miller said. "Usually we don't even know when it will be. Anything unexpected could occur."

At 8:34 p.m., just as the elementary school was approaching its capacity, CDOT re-opened the road to all traffic, and motorists piled back into their vehicles heading straight for the on-ramp.

"The lessons we learned from last year was to be more proactive in opening shelters farther in advanced," Cochran said. "We'll learn something new throughout the whole season... We can only get better."

Communication is a two-way street

In the event of an interstate closure in Summit County, local authorities are in constant communication with both CDOT and the Colorado State Patrol, a feat that is not always as easy as it seems.

"It all boils down to information sharing," I-70 Coalition chairman and Frisco town manager Michael Penny said. "CDOT meets with the county quarterly, and we are always focused on how to communicate in a more timely fashion so people know what is going on."

Summit County agencies now are operating on the same radio channel that CDOT broadcasts on, Northwest Net, putting the two entities on the same page when it comes to instant updates.

CDOT also is making a conscious effort to improve the flow of information to drivers, and soon the organization will unveil a new version of their traveler website, [www.cotrip.org](http://www.cotrip.org).

"There will be a better selection of traffic cameras, and more will be in real time," Miller said, adding that CDOT still does not have a set date on when the new website will go live.

Moving forward

With the winter driving season now in full-swing, agencies along the I-70 corridor are hoping to improve before the next big storm.

"From this closure, we learned that we need to have a more robust system in place for information flow," Cochran said. "This will give drivers enough time to react to the situation and make better choices."

The newly established county-wide emergency notification system Summit County Alert did prove successful over the past weekend, and those drivers registered in the program received text messages regarding the road closure only moments after CDOT announced it.

Summit County Alert went live the first week in October, and residents can subscribe to the service free of cost at [www.scalert.org](http://www.scalert.org). So far, the site has 1,350 registered users.

"Everyone always complains about lack of information," Penny said. "Getting travelers the information they need in real time will require a lot of coordination from all the players ... but it's not an unattainable notion."

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