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## I-70 mountain corridor: Time for real improvements

Independence Institute, Colorado  
Libertarian Think Tank

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In its final congressional continuing budget resolution, Congress zeroed out funding for Obama's High-Speed Rail initiative and reduced funding for Amtrak.

How does this affect the I-70 corridor? It simply means that any hope of federal funding for a \$20 billion Golden to Eagle County Advanced Guideway System (AGS) is dead. Also dead is the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority proposed \$25 billion High-Speed Rail (HSR) system that included tracks from DIA to Grand Junction.

And Colorado has no funds, according to the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS), that it could allocate to AGS Ñ not even for the massive research, development, and testing program necessary to determine if AGS is technically feasible.

It's also very questionable that the state would want federal funds for AGS or HSR. Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida have rejected HSR funds to protect their taxpayers from overruns and fare subsidies potentially costing billions of dollars.

The AGS ridership analysis in the PEIS assumed that Colorado taxpayers would be willing to pay around 80 percent of the ticket price at a cost in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The RMRA study determined that 35 million passengers per year would ride HSR. However, this is hardly credible considering the entire Amtrak system, including the densely populated northeast corridors, carries 27 million per year. If these systems don't perform as advertised, then the state runs the risk of having to pay back the capital costs to the federal government. That's an

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exposure Colorado taxpayers can ill afford.

It's perfectly clear that neither AGS nor HSR in the I-70 mountain corridor are financially feasible. So it's time to move on and implement real and affordable improvements. It's time to realize that mountain residents and visitors, the state's vital ski and recreation industry, and all the many users of the highway cannot and should not endure worsening congestion while waiting for a train that will never come. Time to revise, once again, the PEIS and remove the Preferred Alternative (that recommended AGS come before any significant highway improvement). Instead, we need to begin an incremental set of highway improvements.

The Colorado Department of Transportation's recent decision to widen the eastbound bore at the Twin Tunnels (east of Idaho Springs) and to add a third eastbound lane from the tunnels to the base of Floyd Hill is a fine and necessary start. But to take advantage of the project, there must be an improvement to the highway capacity from Empire Junction, where traffic from US-40 merges with I-70, to the Twin Tunnels. This is the critical point of congestion where three lanes of traffic are reduced down to two lanes. Only when this "pinch point" is resolved can the widened tunnel significantly benefit the I-70 traveler.

Clearly, though, this is a sensitive section of the corridor, and some people have resisted highway widening for decades. However, there is a "non-widening" solution that would maintain the current footprint and have little, if any, environmental impact. This solution is known as "Hard Shoulders" – the conversion of safety lanes to travel lanes but only during peak travel times such as Sunday afternoon.

In a recent report to Congress, the Federal Highway Administration explained the implementation of safety shoulders as travel lanes as a method to increase the efficient use of highway capacity. Similar conversions throughout the nation and world report successful results and little, if any, negative feedback. Most notable are conversions on I-5 in California and I-66 in Virginia. The shoulder lanes are generally limited to peak hour use and controlled by electronic signing and video camera detection. Additionally, "active management" systems monitor the lanes and shut them down in the event of emergency, weather, or accident situations.

Gov. Hickenlooper has promised a sensible plan to reduce congestion within a two-four year period. Hard shoulders is a way he can make good on his promise.

John Aldridge is a professional traffic operations engineer and research associate in transportation policy at the Independence Institute, a Golden-based libertarian think tank. The views expressed in this guest editorial are those of the Independence Institute and not necessarily those of the Denver Daily News. Respond at [editor@thedenverdailynews.com](mailto:editor@thedenverdailynews.com).