



Workshop looks at I-70 transit options

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COPPER MOUNTAIN - Although the idea of mass transit in the I-70 corridor may still seem like pie-in-the-sky stuff, a pair of neighboring states have aggressively pushed ahead with their own plans to address transportation needs in urbanized corridors.

Thursday, Project managers for New Mexico's Rail Runner system and the Utah Transit Authority outlined their efforts at the start of the I-70 Coalition's transit workshop and retreat at Copper Mountain.

Government leadership and buy-in from the business community were crucial to designing and executing transit plans in both cases. In the Albuquerque to Santa Fe corridor, Gov. Bill Richardson put some of his political capital on the line, said Rail Runner project manager Chris Blewett.

"He (Richardson) said, 'I'm going to have the first phase of this done in two years.' It was the most important statement he could have made," Blewett said.

"A lot of people thought this was crazy ... People kept saying, 'You can't do this.' We didn't accept any of the conventional wisdom. We kept saying, 'Why not?'" Blewett said. "There was a lot of skepticism. People say nothing ever gets done in New Mexico. That may have worked to our advantage," Blewett said.

The first phase of the project, between Belen and Albuquerque, was completed in just more than two years, just slightly behind the schedule announced by Gov. Richardson, Blewett said, going on to explain that it required an innovative approach.

"We used a streamlined procurement process. We had no public process and not a single intergovernmental agreement, we didn't do ridership projections, and we had only three budget meetings in two-and-a-half years," Blewett said, eliciting a laugh from the crowd. "We tried to make this thing believable and real."

"We tried to adopt a European attitude," Blewett continued. "This isn't about today. This is about New Mexico's future."

Dillon Mayor Barbara Davis said the I-70 Coalition could take a page from the New Mexico playbook by trying not to get too bogged down in the process and losing sight of the long-term goal.

Along Utah's Wasatch Front, squeezed in between the mountains and the Great Salt Lake, key stakeholders recognized that transportation is the backbone of the state's economy, said Steve Meyer, engineering and construction manager for the Utah Transit Authority. About 80 percent of the state's population lives in the corridor and the movement of goods constitutes a \$100 billion per year industry, Meyer explained.

Meyer said winning over the private sector was key to moving ahead with the mass transit project in the corridor, where ridership is already double the projected level. Meyer said the state transit agency took a bare-bones, no frills approach - for example buying used railroad cars from other areas. The Utah rail system will serve demand equivalent to an entire lane on I-15, he said.

"It shows you can get it done," Vail town manager Stan Zemler said after the morning session. "We need to cut

the same path and not accept no. And we need to find a statewide solution," Zemler said. "We need to keep an eye on the PEIS process and make sure it offers a multi-modal solution with transit as a component," he said, referring to a current Colorado Department of Transportation planning effort. "We have to get a transit corridor secured and a commitment to transit," Zemler concluded.

Breckenridge town manager Tim Gagen said the I-70 question requires a statewide solution.

"My guess is that RTD will be expanded to play a statewide role," Gagen said, explaining that there is no reason to re-invent the wheel by creating a new agency.

Gagen said there is still the looming question of how to integrate the short-term demand for more highway capacity with the long-term need for a transit alternative.

Both Zemler and Gagen said the examples from Utah and New Mexico were illustrative, but emphasized that the I-70 corridor is a unique scenario requiring a unique solution.

The workshop and retreat continues today with sessions on funding, as well as a transit technology expo.

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