

Reality Check for I-70 Timeline

Michael Penny

Chairman, I-70 Coalition (also serves on Governor Ritter's Transportation Finance and Implementation Panel, and the Colorado Department of Transportation Federal Reauthorization Committee)

There has been a lot of media play recently on high speed rail within the I-70 Corridor. Over the last four years, I have spent a significant amount of time learning about the legal process, costs, and logistics of improving the I-70 corridor. The reality of the legal and financial processes necessary to develop any improvement in the corridor are time consuming and incredibly complex. I've attempted to provide enough detail to tie the parts together without putting the reader to sleep. There are two intertwined discussions which occur in the I-70 Corridor; highway improvements and high speed rail. The first section of my report focuses more on the highway and then concludes with the rail discussion. Then, of course, there is the issue of funding....

While you can go further back in time, I believe the year 2000 is a good place to start (I apologize in advance for the number of acronyms). This was the year when the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) undertook a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS). The PEIS is a process required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) which came into existence in 1970 following concerns with the Federal government's destruction of neighborhoods and the natural environment while building highways in the 50's and 60's. NEPA requirements must be followed for any federal, state, or local project which is anticipating Federal funding. The PEIS is a high-level evaluation of alternatives for the area being studied, which in this case is Golden to Glenwood Springs. CDOT expects the Record of Decision (ROD) for the PEIS to be completed in 2010 - a ten year process for what is, without question, a very complex section of the federal highway system. It is anticipated that the ROD will include high speed rail and specific highway improvements in the final decision. It is important to note that no substantive work can begin on the corridor until the ROD has been completed.

Further, the NEPA process, requires additional studies for those areas or projects within the PEIS which are either substantial in scope (such as highway improvements between Floyd Hill and the Twin Tunnels), or have sensitive environmental considerations. These Tier 2 studies can take several years to complete. Some estimates are five to eight additional years. Maybe less if there is consensus around the solution.

In 2008, the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority (RMRA) began a study to evaluate the feasibility of high speed rail on the I-25 corridor from border to border, and the I-70 corridor from Denver International Airport (DIA) to Grand Junction. This study, expected by mid-2009, should be the definitive analysis on the feasibility of rail, including identifying the type of rail which could work in our environment, the capital costs, the on-going operational costs, ridership, location of stops and alignments.

To assist with this study, the I-70 Coalition has undertaken a process with the local jurisdictions along I-70 to determine location and scale of potential stops along the corridor. From these discussions several key issues have surfaced. First, it should be fairly obvious that the more stops you have, the less timely the transportation system can operate, so the number of stops will take some time to work through. The location of stops is a critical discussion as it relates to rail alignment and community impacts. Local transit service providers (Summit Stage for Summit County) have raised concerns about their ability to handle the additional demand that would be placed on existing transit systems. Communities and individuals are starting to discuss the positive and negative social and economic implications of having easy access to the Front Range.

Now is where it gets more complex and overlapping. The geographic boundaries of the PEIS were from Golden to Glenwood Springs. We would anticipate, for rail to be feasible, a run from DIA to Eagle Airport would be required. This would mean that a PEIS would be required for DIA to Golden. Now, I would not anticipate that this would take another ten years, but it could easily be four to six...remember you're now going through a highly urbanized land area...and, of course, there may be requirements for Tier 2 studies before construction could begin. For the rail located with the I-70 PEIS - Golden to Glenwood Springs - the Tier 2 studies could begin in 2010.

Right about now you should be asking yourself "If all this process and time delay is because of NEPA, can we do this without Federal funding and just get on with it?" For two reasons, the resounding answer is and should be "No." 1. The magnitude of the cost (CDOT estimates 2006 dollars to be around 8 billion dollars) will require Federal participation and; 2. the communities along the corridor will demand that the project be evaluated and constructed in a context sensitive manner anyway - which takes time. So, the best thing we can do is stay involved and push the state and federal agencies to move as quickly as legally allowed to resolution.

Where might the money come from to do any of this? CDOT currently has no money in the bank for major capital improvements in the corridor. In 1997 the legislature passed SB1 and created the '7th Pot projects'. These were 28 strategic projects around the state, of which, the I-70 corridor was one. The 7th Pot Projects are only funded after the state meets certain revenue thresholds (read as good economic years). I-70 has approximately 1.6 million dollars identified within the 7th Pot. This money will begin to become available in 2017 (after T-Rex bonds are paid off) and it could take up to ten years or more before total funding is realized. The other wrinkle in this money is, due to a state constitutional limitation, the funds can only be used for highway purposes and cannot be used for transit. That said, this money will go a long way towards funding the numerous interchange improvements, climbing lanes, curve straightening, and other safety improvements necessary for the interstate highway to be a safe travel corridor.

Capital and ongoing operational expenses for a rail system will take local, state dollars, federal dollars, and a private partner to make it a reality. State dollars will mean a ballot measure to fund a statewide transportation solution (remember, CDOT doesn't even have enough money to maintain the existing transportation infrastructure). Tying the I-70 rail

funding solution to an I-25 rail system will be integral to a successful ballot measure. Tying both corridors to a state-wide transit plan will also be key - this is currently in process at the direction of Governor Ritter. Availability of Federal funding for transit projects across the country is very much tied to the 2009 Federal Transportation Reauthorization bill (SAFETY-LU). This bill is not expected to be passed until 2010 or 2011...surprised? Lastly, a public/private partnership will be necessary from a capital and on-going operational and maintenance standpoint. How and when those details can be worked through with the uncertainty of the state/federal funding is anyone's guess.

Now that I made you read all that, here are the bullet points:

- The description of the I-70 improvements will be legally completed in 2010.
- Smaller highway improvement projects may start as soon as 2011.
- Major highway improvements may begin in 2017.
- If determined to be feasible, rail design could begin for our segment of I-70 as soon as 2010 and, if financing is secured, construction could begin between 2015-2020.

There are no silver bullets or easy answers to this corridor. This corridor serves as an interstate highway, a tourist avenue, and as our local road. The users are many. The government entities and geographic regions involved are numerous. The interstate also runs through some of the most pristine and rugged scenery in the country. The solutions are complex and costly. This all adds up to taking the time to make the right decisions, following the correct legal procedures, finding the right funding mechanisms, and designing and construction the solution in a way which minimizes the social, economic, historic, and environmental impacts.

Finally, I believe that CDOT does a great job on maintaining the highway in a very safe manner. Substantial improvements in communications, enforcement, and winter operations have been made in the last two years.

There is a substantial amount of information on the web if you are interested in learning more. Three key sites are www.i70solutions.org, www.rockymountainrail.org, and www.dot.state.co.us/StateWidePlanning/PlansStudies/blueribbon.asp.

I hope this has helped provide some light towards seeing the end of the tunnel...from your seat on that high speed rail system.

Michael Penny