

Coalition wants study of I-70 rail  
Says CDOT stacked deck in favor of widening road

By Kevin Flynn, Rocky Mountain News  
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Groups that favor train service to relieve congestion on Interstate-70 in the mountains want federal officials to order more study of that alternative.

They argue the state stacked the deck against rail between Denver and Vail in favor of widening the road.

A coalition of environmental and transportation advocacy groups also says the Colorado Department of Transportation hasn't adequately looked at the impacts of highway widening on wildlife, and on the social and economic fabric of mountain communities.

The coalition is made up of organizations such as local chapters of the Sierra Club, Trout Unlimited, Audubon Society, the American Institute of Architects, the Clear Creek I-70 Task Force, PLAN Jeffco, ColoRail and Transit West.

They made their request to the Federal Highway Administration, which oversees CDOT's conduct of the study. Dave Nicol, the FHWA administrator for Colorado, said his agency has taken the coalition's concerns "under advisement."

Since 2000, CDOT has spent about \$20 million looking into the environmental impacts of I-70 improvements, as required by federal law.

To match the options with expected revenues, CDOT set a ceiling of \$4 billion on planned improvements, a move critics charged was aimed at eliminating transit alternatives that tend to be costlier.

"They shoved us off to never-neverland," said Bert Melcher of the Sierra Club.

He said rail has become more affordable, and a train between Denver and Vail could be built for less than \$4 billion.

The coalition says new technologies in electrified rail and changing circumstances, such as the Denver area's approval of the FasTracks rail system, cry out for CDOT to do a "supplemental" study taking them into account.

CDOT's current alternatives include bus service in dedicated express lanes within the highway median.

The coalition says widening for that would devastate mountain valleys and their communities.

"Try to imagine T-REX running through the middle of Idaho Springs," said Bill Astle of the Evergreen Naturalists Audubon Society.

Jeff Kullman, CDOT's director for the region that includes the I-70 corridor, said high-speed rail was seriously considered but not chosen. He said there's no need to reopen the discussion now.

"Somewhere along the line when you do a study, you have to say, 'This is what we're doing,' " Kullman said. "There's always something new coming along, but the things we're aware of won't materially change the decision."

The coalition also criticized the study's assessment of environmental damage resulting from widening I-70 and how to address it.

"Some of us have been on advisory groups that have been terminated," said Gary Frey of West Denver Trout Unlimited, who was on a committee that advised on aquatic life.

Environmental damage to fish habitat as well as wildlife areas was given cursory examination, and measures to protect against damage were vague and couched in terms such as "will be done if reasonable," Frey said.

"It was listen and ignore," he said.