

Relief for I-70 snarls elusive
By Kevin Flynn, Rocky Mountain News
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Help is on the way. But not anytime soon.

The problems caused by traffic congestion on Interstate 70 between Denver and Eagle County - traversing the heart of the state's resort industry - will cost billions of dollars to fix. And billions of dollars are not available. Still, the Colorado Department of Transportation has been engaged in an environmental impact study since 2001 to arrive at a series of projects to ease congestion.

The I-70 Mountain Corridor study, costing \$23 million, is pending final approval. But even now, critics are saying it relies too much on lane widening and too little on transit alternatives such as train service.

Critics want more study, but CDOT says it's time to move on - even if it doesn't know yet how it will pay for the work.

The state set a cap of \$4 billion on the projected cost of adding lanes, punching new tunnel bores through the mountains at the Continental Divide, Idaho Springs, Dowd Canyon and Floyd Hill, and providing express lanes in the median for buses or toll-paying drivers. But CDOT is only able to identify \$1.6 billion coming in over the next 20 years that it can devote to the project.

Tolls can make up part of the difference. A third bore at the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnels - which now afford only four lanes - could entail a toll on the entire facility. Right now, state law prohibits tolls on existing highways, so that would require a change from the legislature.

The study has several alternatives under final analysis.

- Six lanes designed for 55 mph speeds;
- Six lanes designed for 65 mph speeds;
- Four free lanes with two separate car-pool or express toll lanes in the center. They could be reversed to carry traffic in either direction, depending on demand;
- Diesel buses operating in new median lanes;
- Dual-powered buses using electricity in new median guideways, and switching to diesel when back on the road;
- Four highway-widening packages, each preserving space for a future transit option such as rail.

The final version of the study is expected in September, with public meetings following that.