

September 19, 2004

CORRESPONDENT'S REPORT

In Colorado, Traffic on the Interstate Is at a Peak

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DENVER

IT'S a late summer Sunday afternoon and all is quiet in the Rocky Mountains of central Colorado. That could mean one of two things. Either you're far away from Interstate 70, frolicking in an alpine meadow, or you're on the Interstate itself, immobilized in your car with the thousands of other fuming weekenders heading east toward Denver.

The I-70 corridor, which is the only direct east-west route to the pleasure grounds of the Rockies from the megalopolis of the Front Range, periodically teeters on the brink of overload.

Tens of thousands of people moved into the mountains or built second homes there in the booming 1990's, and that has meant more commuters, and more trucks making deliveries to supply all the new stores and restaurants. Out-of-state tourists flocking to the summer music and arts festivals or the ski slopes at Aspen, Breckenridge or Vail are doomed as well to the same well-trodden if beautiful route.

On an average day in August 1993, 27,675 vehicles passed through the Eisenhower/Johnson Memorial Tunnel 60 miles west of Denver, according to the Colorado State Department of Transportation. By August 2003, the number had climbed by about 28 percent, to 35,585 vehicles a day (in July 2004, there were 35,600 vehicles).

The road, meanwhile, which was one of the last pieces of the Interstate System to be completed in the 1960's and 1970's, because of the difficult engineering demanded by its many passes, narrow valleys and tunnels, has remained fixed: four lanes of travel for most of its length - with a few patches of five or six lanes but no special lanes for buses or high-occupancy vehicles - and what's worse, few options if the way is blocked by traffic, weather or an accident.

"Is there a crisis? The perception is we're already there," said Cecelia Joy, the planning and environmental manager for the Colorado Department of Transportation's Region 1, which includes the I-70 corridor. "And the mountain community population is expected to double over the next 20 years."

Ms. Joy said the state was considering 20 options for the highway, ranging from extra traffic lanes to a magnetic monorail line, and all of them, because of the difficult topography of the mountains, are costly. A "preferred list" of nine alternatives has been culled out by cost - \$4 billion or less to build. Most of the options could take more than a decade to complete.

The politics are also vertiginous. Many local residents in the mountain communities say that simply widening the road, which is one of those preferred options, would be environmentally disastrous and

shortsighted. More lanes, they say, would simply be packed sooner or later with more cars, and little resulting change in the end but worsened air quality.

Local politicians have instead argued for a rail option that would let Denverites leave their cars at home. Other transportation experts say the operational costs of running a mountain rail line could make the price of a ticket to the resorts prohibitive, or at least uncompetitive with private vehicles, resulting in a colossally expensive flop.

Either way, both rail and road choices would probably mean carving another 1.7-mile-long tunnel through the mountains east of Vail alongside the two current tubes of the Eisenhower/Johnson tunnels, which took 12 years to build at more than 11,000 feet in elevation and are the highest vehicular tunnels in the world.

"We don't want to do something that would increase numbers of cars on the road; we'd like to move the same number of people with less cars," said Gary Lindstrom, a state legislator who represents much of the corridor, including the resort towns of Vail and Breckenridge.

Ski resort officials say that for now, most of the cost and aggravation of I-70's traffic troubles have been borne by their customers, who continue to come, albeit with a bit more grumbling. In fact, worsening traffic has been almost a mixed blessing for the tourism business.

The vice president and chief operating officer for Vail Resorts, Bill Jensen, said sales of season ski passes have risen steadily in recent years at the company's four Colorado resorts - Vail, Breckenridge, Keystone and Beaver Creek - and that the desire for flexibility in skiing and travel times is probably one of the reasons. Season-pass holders can pick the best hours of the day and so avoid the I-70 rush at sundown. Overnight stays by Denver-area residents are also up, Mr. Jensen said, for the same reason.

"We've seen dramatic growth in in-state residents making an overnight trip - it's our fastest growing guest segment in the last three years," he said. "I attribute a significant portion of that growth to people's desire to avoid the lengthened commute."

He said Vail Resorts had expanded the number of overnight room options, including some lower-priced choices, but has not undertaken any specific marketing campaign to exploit the highway's troubles by reminding visitors what they might face on the way home.