

County discusses futuristic transport

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CDOT leads the advanced guideway project with consultant, aims to be operable by 2025 Wednesday, November 7, 2012

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This image shows what the advanced guideway system might look like if and when it is built in 2025. The Colorado Department of Transportation, consultants and stakeholders are currently reviewing 18 proposed technologies for the AGS. Transrapid is one among many proposers still under consideration. *Special to the Enterprise*

If time is distance, the future is approaching at a faster rate.

The Colorado Department of Transportation is eyeing the future by developing the plan to build an advanced guideway system (AGS) – basically high speed trains – along the Interstate 70 corridor to connect to other systems planned for the Front Range.

Last week, representatives from CDOT's Division of Transit and Rail met with consultants, Eagle County staff, and Commissioners Peter Runyon and Sara Fisher. Representatives from Vail and Avon were also at the meeting. The CDOT members said the goal is to have the AGS operational by 2025.

The "AGS project" pertains specifically to the I-70 corridor. CDOT is the project sponsor and AZTEC/TYPSA Group is the lead consultant. AZTEC Vice President Mike Riggs said

AZTEC's mother firm, TYPSA, is based in Spain and has significant high-speed rail and tunneling experience throughout the world.

AZTEC is currently reviewing 18 "statement of technology information" reports – basically proposals for technology that could be used for a guideway system.

Of the 18 tech companies that have submitted work, some will be invited to a technology forum Dec. 13 and 14 in Jefferson County. The forum will have two parts. One part will be open to the public for citizens to see some of the latest guideway technology. The second part will be private meetings between planners and the tech companies.

"We want to focus on commercially viable options – stuff that could be implemented tomorrow – and not hold our breath waiting for technologies that might be viable in seven or eight years," said CDOT's David Krutsinger. "Also, our current process isn't intended to 'pick' a single technology, rather it is to have convincing evidence whether various technologies can successfully operate through Colorado's mountains."

In addition to the technology reviews, alignment design and cost estimates are being formulated. That process is expected to run from November through April.

The larger timeline, from 2013 to 2017, includes two environmental impact studies, preliminary engineering, establishment of an organizational structure for the AGS, public funding sources research and preparation of a development agreement in collaboration with three finalists. From 2017 to 2019, finalists are to prepare their best and final offers, of which one will be selected and a financial deal closed. From 2020 to 2025, a minimum operating segment will be built, tested and commissioned, opening to the public by the end of 2025.

Putting an extra squeeze on the 2025 timeline are the environmental impact studies, which expire at that time. The studies are required by federal government. If the AGS isn't up and running by 2025, new studies would have to look at what improvements should be made to solve traffic problems in the meantime. Additionally, many major road improvements along the I-70 corridor are on hold until 2025 in anticipation of the guideway system, which could affect changes to those roads.

Looking ahead

"We can't think about how it is today, we have to think about how it is tomorrow," Riggs said. "We're looking at a combination of technologies to get people where they want to go quickly."

Anticipating the future is tricky business. The challenge of funding the AGS project was barely touched on at last week's meeting. Discussions centered mostly around theoretical locations for stops along the system.

Planners are thinking of two stops in Eagle County – somewhere around Vail, Avon or even Edwards, and at Eagle County Regional Airport, which is currently projected as the end of the line for the AGS project. The vision is to eventually extend it all the way to Salt Lake City.

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In the interest of speed, planners want to keep the number of stops to a minimum. Two stops is as many as any other region – Summit County – is getting at this point.

“Studies show ‘faster’ is the way to generate ridership,” Riggs said.

With stops kept to a minimum, planners are trying to identify the best hubs, especially considering that when people get off the AGS, other transportation systems will be needed to get them to their final destinations.

Runyon pointed out that while winter visitors are primarily going to the ski resorts – in which case a station at the base of Vail Mountain could be an advantage – summer visitors will have more needs in terms of luggage and reaching destinations such as rivers and camping areas.

“That secondary distribution is going to be a huge issue,” Runyon said.

Potential impacts

Some impacts CDOT promised to investigate include those on communities and the airport. An AGS might result in more people living in the mountains and commuting to Denver on the system. That could change the nature of a community. Further, Eagle County Regional Airport Director Greg Phillips said there will surely be some impact on flight service at the airport.

“We want to be wary about collapsing air service here,” he said. “If it becomes so easy to get to Denver International Airport, where a flight might be cheaper, people might just go there instead. Part of this study should consider that impact to the airport.”

Another aspect discussed Tuesday is the matter of space each station will need. An AGS could be suspended or put under ground, so there are options to orient stations vertically.

A typical station needs a platform that is straight and flat, about 1,000 feet long and 80 feet wide. About 1,000 to 2,500 parking spaces will also be needed in addition to other transit connections. Fifteen acres are typically budgeted for all that. In Vail’s case, there is already a parking garage and transportation center near the mountain where structures could be made, vertically oriented, so less acreage is needed there.

Finally, a maintenance facility will likely need to be built near the end of the line, which would be the airport. A maintenance facility would be bigger than a typical station but it would not need to be directly on the line.

Besides the space it occupies, an AGS station could be disruptive to a community. Justin Hildreth, an engineer for the town of Avon, said the suggested station site in Avon was not the best place, partly because of noise and traffic impacts. He said it might be better to put it in a place that is more remote in terms of development, such as Dowd Junction.

CDOT’s Mark Imhoff said that is a good question to consider.

“Do you use an AGS to serve an existing community or do you use it to define a new one?” he said.

Fisher and Runyon pointed out that Eagle County’s community tends to have a higher turnover than other places, due to a workforce that is more seasonal and transient.

“How people get here and what they do could be different from today,” Fisher said.

Runyon said there could be all sorts of unintended consequences.

“We did an informal survey of the towns about this idea and they all expressed cautious approval,” he said. “(An AGS) puts growth pressure on towns.”

Runyon also said that new technology could make many of today’s questions moot.

“So much is dependent on the technology that’s chosen,” he said.

That’s why AZTEC’s first step from here is to review the 18 submittals of tech information.

History

The process for all this transit discussion technically began in 1998 when the state created the Colorado Fixed Guideway Authority. CIFGA was to determine if a system could be deployed in Colorado.

Since then, the I-70 Coalition was created in 2005. The coalition includes more than 30 jurisdictions in the mountain corridor.

In 2011 – after a collaborative effort in 2008 that reached a consensus that an AGS was the way to go – CDOT and the Federal Highway Administration incorporated that consensus in the final pragmatic environmental impact statement and record of decision for the I-70 mountain corridor.

Now, the year 2025 can barely be seen up ahead, a distant dot on the horizon.

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