

No noise wall in Vail?

By the numbers

\$21 million: Original estimate for an underpass project in Vail.

\$29 million current estimate.

\$8.4 million: The town of Vail's share of the project cost.

\$4.8 million: Estimated cost of a 3,400-foot acrylic noise wall.

VAIL — If a new underpass beneath Interstate 70 in Vail is built — still a significant if — it's unlikely to include a noise wall.

The Vail Town Council last week voted against supporting a 3,400-foot noise wall on the north side of I-70 as part of the underpass project. If a majority of project neighbors cast similar votes — and neighbors speaking to the council overwhelmingly oppose a wall — then the project will die.

How the council got to the point of casting roughly one-third of the votes on the possible wall project is somewhat complicated, and the underpass project itself seems to be far less a sure thing than it was six months ago. Both require some explanation.

The Colorado Department of Transportation announced in 2013 that it would fund roughly 70 percent of the cost of a new underpass about halfway between the Main Vail and West Vail interstate interchanges. Town and state officials had wanted to build the underpass for decades, in the name of taking traffic away from roundabouts and making it easier for town residents and guests to get from, say, Lionshead to City Market. The project was also touted for its public safety benefits, since police, fire and medical vehicles would be able to cross from the north to the south sides of the interstate without going all the way from one interchange to the other.

DESIGN PROCESS

As part of the design process, state and federal officials required an environmental assessment for the project. Part of that assessment included the effect of noise on neighboring property. That study determined that the north side of the project — which stretches roughly from the Timber Ridge apartments on the east to the Savoy Villas condos on the west — would qualify for a noise wall along the highway. But affected residents would have to vote for that wall in a survey that's been sent out to those users. A vote in favor means a wall would have to be built.

Since the town of Vail owns the Timber Ridge apartments, and since about half of those apartments are currently under construction, the town of Vail became one of the affected parties. With votes parceled out by unit, that gave the town 68 votes, plus one for the bike path along the frontage road.

With that block of votes, the council's position could swing the survey one way or another.

The debate about how to portion out those votes stretched over portions of two council meetings.

Last week, council members decided they would vote proportionally to how the council voted.

Project neighbors almost universally urged the council to vote against the wall.

"The cost of the wall is outrageous, and the benefit is negligible," resident Rich Larson told the council. Larson and his wife own a unit at the Simba Run condos. He said highway noise has been greatly reduced since owners there finished an improvement project that included insulated windows.

'A PLAN THAT WON'T WORK'

Whatever benefits a wall might bring wouldn't offset the damage to his unit's views, Larson said.

Carol Calcaterra, another Simba Run resident, also urged the council not to support a wall.

“A noise wall would destroy what the underpass is trying to achieve, and that’s bringing Vail together,” Calcaterra said.

Charlie Calcaterra, Carol’s husband, has been a frequent speaker at council meetings lately, since he’s the head of Simba Run’s homeowner committee that monitors the underpass project.

He told council members that a Colorado Department of Transportation study has determined that noise walls have no impact on homes above those walls.

“I urge you to vote ‘no’ on a plan that won’t work in our topography,” he said.

Of the neighborhood residents to speak about the plan, only Bill Pierce, a longtime Vail architect and Simba Run resident, spoke in favor of the wall.

“This is an area that deserves mitigation,” Pierce said.

After listening to residents and further debate, the council voted 5-2 not to support the wall, with members Greg Moffet and Dale Bugby essentially voting in favor.

What that means is that the town’s vote block will be split, with 49 votes against the wall and 19 in favor.

COST OF PROJECT

Again, though, there’s some question whether the underpass will be built.

Some council members are starting to question the cost of the project, which has risen from about \$21 million to about \$29 million. The town’s share of the increase will require another \$2.4 million beyond the \$6 million the town first committed to the project.

STATE FUNDING

In addition, there are questions whether the state will fund the increase.

Town engineer Tom Kassmel told council members that the Colorado Transportation Commission — which must approve new funding — is working to find ways to fund similar cost increases on projects across the state. Kassmel said the commission has found about \$40 million to cover those increases, but the current project list has roughly \$80 million in cost increases.

State officials won’t commit to an answer about increased funding until the designs are 90 percent complete. Kassmel said in Vail’s case, that milestone will come in April of this year.

If the state and town agree to fund the higher cost in Vail, then construction could start in the spring of 2016 and be finished toward the end of 2017.

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