



Frontage Road Parking at Lionshead Parking Structure

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Vail Frontage Road Parking:

Double or Nothing?

The Town of Vail reports a near doubling of days on which parking has occurred on the Vail I-70 Frontage Roads during this ski season: more than forty days as compared with 20 last year. There are those who for reason of safety would like parking banned from the Frontage Roads, others want it increased.

In reaction to Vail Resorts Inc. (VRI) marketing of the economical Epic Ski Pass for next season, there are concerns that commuter skiers will overburden parking and mass transit facilities. The public parking problem is not exclusively caused by VRI's skiers or employees. Construction workers and employees of other businesses contribute as well.

Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the Town have control over whether or not parking is allowed on the Frontage Roads. CDOT, it is reported, has a 13-day limit on Frontage Road parking. In the past CDOT has warned and fined the TOV for exceeding the limit.

Vail Resorts and the Town of Vail have a long-standing skier capacity limit on Vail Mountain. The agreement is tied to controlling parking congestion on Vail's Frontage Roads. The TOV is responsible for managing nearly all forms of parking and mass transportation through zoning and contractual agreements.

The Town Council has begun a debate about parking policies for the Frontage Roads and parking structures. The crux of the debate, both on the mountain and in the community, is an important quality-of-life issue for Vail residential property owners.

Commentary: Jonathan Stauffer – Vail environmental activist and commentator makes a case for improved regional bus service to reduce traffic congestion and parking demand.

The Vail Town Council and Town of Vail officials are scrambling in response to Vail Resorts' announcement that they would offer a \$579 Epic Ski Pass. Of immediate concern is the impact that the pass will have on the already overtaxed infrastructure of Vail, particularly parking.

For the past decade or so, the Town government has tended to look at Vail's increasing woes regarding the automobile as a parking problem or a traffic problem. The fact is, Vail has a car problem.



Saturday rush hour Vail Village Transportation Center © photo JFLamont

Vail was brilliantly designed as a pedestrian town, offering free transportation service throughout the Village and Lionshead and to the Town's outlying areas that was the envy of every town in America, particularly during the Arab oil embargoes of the 1970's. Vail was New Urban before the term existed.

During the past 20 years, growth in Denver and Down Valley, along with cheap gas, have spurred automobile use to heretofore unseen levels, creating a situation that is particularly visible in overflowing parking and traffic congestion in Vail and I-70 during peak weekends of the winter season.

For a decade now, a number of people have been working diligently at what we hope will provide a long-term solution to traffic on I-70 – a high-speed train from Denver to Vail. Through the efforts of mountain government coalitions and the Sierra Club's

Transportation Chair, Bert Melcher, we have insisted that the Colorado Department of Transportation at least examine the benefits and costs of such a scenario in their ongoing Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement of the Interstate 70 corridor.

In the near term, however, the problems continue to persist and multiply. The Town of Vail and Vail Resorts need to examine immediate solutions to the existing problem.

One solution would be to offer luxury motor coach service to Vail from key demographic areas in the Front Range on weekends and during peak periods of the high season. The service can be paid for by a reduction in maintenance costs for providing free parking on the Frontage Roads. This practice should be done away with for budgetary and more importantly for safety – there is a grave risk that between people looking for free parking, others racing to work and pedestrians in ski boots slipping on the ice that someone will be badly injured or even killed if the practice is allowed to continue.

If we take into account that the Town Staff are proposing to spend \$1.2 million in Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT) funds during the scheduled 2008 widening of the Frontage Road shoulders, ostensibly for biking, but more likely, for overflow parking, the motor coach scenario is a relative bargain.

Rather than purchasing new equipment, the Town and Vail Resorts could contract with a luxury motor coach operator (Arrow Stage Lines from Denver, for example), most of which have idle rolling stock during the winter season.

The proposed tolls on I-70 would no doubt assist in efforts to get more people to ride mass transit. Gas prices definitely will: they are predicted to reach \$4.00 and perhaps \$5.00 per gallon this summer.

Further incentive could be provided by designating an existing lane for buses only at various choke points along I-70, i.e. at Eisenhower Tunnel and at Idaho Springs. This would have to be negotiated with the state officials, who are currently pulling their hair out looking for ways to improve the situation within severe budgetary constraints.

This would be one viable option: running a luxury motor coach from 10 Front Range locations assuming 3 round trips and full utilization the motor coach circulate would eliminate 810 trips on Interstate 70 and would reduce CO2 emissions by approximately 69,000 lbs (travelmatters.org emissions calculator) each day the service is utilized. It would also eliminate the need to park 405 cars here in Vail.

While working on providing bus service to the Front Range, the Town and Vail Resorts should be working with ECOtran (Eagle County Transit Authority) to investigate ways of improving service in Eagle County. For a brief while, for example, the utility operated a free “skiers express,” but the service was badly promoted, badly scheduled and unsuccessful. There is no doubt that someone living in Miller Ranch would use the service if it took only a few minutes longer to reach Vail than by car and meant not having to deal with the hassles of Dowd Junction or parking in Vail. The popularity of the Town's de facto “park and rides” in West Vail provide testament to this. We need to provide further incentive for Down Valley locals to dispense with their cars all together.

A modicum of time spent studying the issues of traffic on the Interstate 70 Corridor and parking in Vail will leave one with no doubt that the problem is too many cars. Expanding automobile infrastructure is an exercise in futility: we will never be able to build enough lanes or enough parking to accommodate demand. Considering the noise and pollution generated by the automobile and roadway maintenance, I am certain we don't want to. The best way to deal with Vail's car problem is to reduce demand.

Many of us dream of a day when one will be able to board a high speed train in Vail and be in Denver forty-five minutes later, arriving fresh and relaxed. In the meantime, what can be done to alleviate Vail's car problem is improving bus service.



Possible Rolling Stock for Luxury Motor Coach Service from the Front Range to Vail:



It is clear than in order to be successful, bus service has to be reasonably priced, comfortable and reliable. It would be in Vail's best interests to take this one step further by offering luxury coach service complete with an on board host to answer questions and perhaps service juice, coffee and continental breakfast. This is Vail after all, we do things first class.

Arrow Stage Lines, for example, operate the 54 passenger Setra S 417 each outfitted with a state-of-the-art audio system, which includes a DVD player, five 15-inch monitors positioned throughout the cabin, a GPS system, a laptop connection, two card tables and leather seating. There is also a bistro, with sink, cappuccino machine and refrigerator in order that continental breakfast can be served en route.



Update: I-70 Closures

The Vail Homeowners Association is experiencing success in its I-70 advocacy efforts with local officials. Progress is resulting from the Association and Town of Vail's meetings to improve the handling of I-70 closures and community evacuation planning. Among the issues discussed with Town officials is the need for I-70 closure procedures to be modified in consultation with Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), other communities and Eagle County authorities. Many of the Association's suggestions are being acted upon, including the formation of a Town-sponsored committee of citizens to work on community evacuation issues.

In a recent I-70 Vail Pass closure on March 31st, Vail's Police Chief had the Colorado Highway Patrol turn back Interstate traffic at a checkpoint set up at the Gypsum and Eagle interchanges. They allowed vehicles to pass that could show local identification. This is a potential problem for non-resident guests and property owners. Vail is considering issuing windshield passes to its residents.

The Eagle County Sheriff put up several check points on Highway 6; again only allowing local traffic to pass. These actions taken early on in the incident helped ease the jamming at Dowd Junction. However, even with these steps it was reported that Dowd Junction had slow moving bumper-to-bumper traffic.



Colorado Highway 24 at the Red Cliff Bridge

© photography - James Franklin Lamont

The gridlock problem, this time, was on Highway 24 which is a detour around Vail Pass via Copper Mountain, Leadville, Red Cliff and Minturn to I-70 Dowd Junction. It was caused when the Colorado Highway Patrol detoured I-70 traffic around a 70-vehicle chain reaction wreck on Vail Pass. Highway 24 was grid locked from 3-5 hours. The two-lane highway, between Red Cliff and Minturn is not well suited for truck or high volume traffic. It is a commuter route to Leadville where a significant part of Vail's workforce lives. The Town of Minturn recently annexed the portion of the highway affected by gridlock. Minturn and CDOT, now jointly bear public safety responsibilities to manage the highway. Minturn typically, at any one time, has one police officer on duty.

The wreck on Vail Pass closed the Pass for about 8 hours. Local emergency responders reported the 70-car wreck, as the worst and most horrific ever on the Pass. It was a chain reaction accident caused by an unchained 18-wheel truck jackknifing in blowing snow and icy conditions. Some critics say the wreck was a direct result of CDOT not putting the chain-up law into effect in time. Complicating the rescue and recovery was no two-way radio service at the accident site. Emergency responders had to rely on their personal cell phones to communicate among themselves.

The inability of CDOT and the Colorado Highway Patrol to make and communicate timely decisions is an increasingly consistent complaint from local emergency responders and the public. There is also strong criticism about the Highway Patrol's inability to properly enforce the chain law, including controlling truck chain-up and storm parking areas. It is reported that the chain law does not uniformly apply to downhill conditions, nor are chains mandatory for all vehicles. Chains for trucks are required only on designated sections of the Interstate. As a consequence, it is unlikely that the truck driver who caused the accident will be subject to prosecution.

As each closure event unfolds, the failure of communications at critical levels of state government surfaces as the root cause of needless suffering. It is reported that this winter there have been 20 closures of I-70 as compared with 4 last winter.

Public officials do not like to put a personal face on highway tragedies as it could influence public opinion against their own shortcomings and inaction. However, in the case of the March 31st accident, the Denver regional media reported that the wreck resulted in the death of a well-respected Colorado middle-school guidance counselor. He was the father of three young children.

Vail Councilman Andy Daly, in a Council work session, insisted that the facts about the closure and the wreck incident be reported immediately to the Vail community. He objected to Vail Town Administrators wanting to withhold public comment until the official accident report was released. Official reports sometimes take two weeks or more to release.

It is Councilman Daly's opinion that not reporting significant incidents immediately is unacceptable as it only contributes to creating an atmosphere of public indifference. Vail Town Administrators made a report that same evening in a regularly scheduled public meeting before the Town Council.

Responsible eyewitness reports and suggested improvements from our membership and the public are helpful. The Association will forward them on (if desired, as a confidential communication) to appropriate officials. Local officials and community leaders respond more effectively to firsthand accounts and recommendations.

Commentary: [Allen Best](#) – Colorado environmental journalist and commentator makes a case in the Aspen Weekly for Buses and Congestion Tolls to incrementally elevate traffic jamming on the I-70 Mountain Corridor.

Incremental change is what's needed. Congestion-pricing is one idea floated this winter by Chris Romer, a Democratic state senator. It makes buckets of sense. We now have the technology to charge vehicles more if they're driven at the busiest times. Higher prices will shave off the peaks. It's not the only answer, but it's a step in the right direction.

We could also use some kind of limited mass transit, probably buses. Despite the depressing image of long-haul buses, short-haul buses work really well in many urban areas. You see lots of professors and scientists shuttling daily between Denver and Boulder, while buses also take Aspen's work force back and forth to work along an 80-mile corridor. Rail in that corridor remains in the wings, as the numbers just aren't there yet. On I-70, Sen. Romer proposes reserving third lanes where they exist for high-occupancy vehicles — why not buses, too?

Read on: [I-70 needs gradual change, not miracle cures.](#) | **ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY**
