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The long & binding roads

Joint city-county organization needs to validate a traffic plan to justify road-impact fees

by Tom Orsini

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Notwithstanding the fact that La Plata County is experiencing one the worst real estate markets in its history and many people are out of work, our county commissioners are currently proposing a schedule of new road-impact fees designed to generate \$120 million in revenue from new construction.

The fees would be in the range of \$5,110 for a 2,500-square-foot single-family home and \$12,672 per 1,000 square feet of restaurant space. Currently, fewer than one-third of the counties in Colorado have fees of this type, and the proposed rates by La Plata County are more than twice the statewide average.

Residents of La Plata County have the right to understand that the proposed \$120 million fee is specifically based on 13 road-improvement projects that were recommended in the 2030 Transportation Integration Plan prepared in 2006. The conclusions reached in the 2006 plan will have major implications for the future of our community.

Essentially, the plan concludes that forecasted traffic congestion on the U.S. Highway 550/160 corridor would be resolved by routing traffic around the corridor via a bypass route (Ewing Mesa bypass) and upgrading the current U.S. Highway 550/160 corridor to a freeway system with frontage roads and periodic overpasses. The Ewing Mesa bypass would connect Grandview through Ewing Mesa to Colorado Highway 3 and U.S. Highway 160. The route also would connect Ewing Mesa to Goeglein through Horse Gulch and extend Jenkins Ranch Road as an arterial connection to Florida Road.

The significance of the Ewing Mesa bypass cannot be overstated. Although projected to save only three minutes in drive time, this route is forecast to cost \$84 million and represents 70 percent of the proposed impact fee. Additionally, the route is forecast to carry 25,000 vehicles per day through one of the most popular recreation areas in the city and terminate that traffic at Eighth Avenue. Resulting traffic congestion could totally change the historic character of Durango.

Duncan Associates, the consulting firm that prepared the county's impact fee study, recommended that the county use an alternative "incremental expansion" approach to its fee calculation and stated that a fee based on specific projects would require a valid traffic plan to "convincingly demonstrate that the improvements it identifies are in fact needed to accommodate projected growth."

Obviously, there have been significant changes since 2006 that essentially invalidate many of the plan's critical assumptions. The integral 2006 traffic forecast assumed a dense development on Ewing Mesa that has failed to materialize; Jenkins Ranch Road is no longer a practical arterial connection to Florida, and the state has begun construction on freeway-type improvements on the U.S. Highway 550/160 corridor that could defer the need for the Ewing Mesa bypass indefinitely.

The use of an outdated long-range planning document for purposes of making critical decisions is indicative of a planning process that is clearly in need of change.

Both Durango and La Plata County used the 2006 plan for purposes of developing their road-impact fees. The city adopted a fee in 2008, and the county is proposing a new fee based on the same 13 road projects. Even though Duncan Associates stressed the need for a valid traffic study and an inter-local agreement between the city and the county, there has been no attempt to update the 2006 plan or enter into a joint transportation planning agreement to facilitate the construction and funding of these projects.

The importance of coordinated regional planning is recognized by both federal and state law. Current federal transportation law mandates any urban area with a population of more than 50,000 to form a metropolitan planning organization that is required to prepare a short-term, financially constrained transportation plan every four years. Durango is currently considered an urban cluster and could easily reach the 50,000 threshold during the next 20-year planning period.

La Plata County residents concerned about the need for the \$84 million Ewing Mesa bypass, the related \$120 million road-impact fee and the lack of coordination between the city and county should write or e-mail the Durango City Council and La Plata County commissioners and encourage them to defer the adoption of the new road impact fee and the construction of any segment of the Ewing Mesa bypass until a permanent joint-planning organization is formed and a validated traffic plan justifies both the fee and the need for the \$84 million construction expenditures.

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