

Uintah officials seek local support in Moab for Book Cliffs road

The Book Cliffs will always be a formidable natural barrier between Moab and Vernal.

But Uintah County officials say they're hoping to move beyond the political divides between the two communities over long-gestating plans to build a "hydrocarbon highway" through the rugged area north of Moab.

Following a shakeup in their political leadership, they say they'd like to see the two counties unite behind plans to develop a route that promotes tourism and visitation to outdoor attractions, national parks and monuments throughout the region.



“From a tourism aspect, we feel like the connectivity between the two counties — if we could clear that up a little bit, it would be a game changer, I think, for both of us,” Uintah County Travel and Tourism Specialist Letha Coltharp told the Grand County Council on Tuesday, April 16. “We’re not looking to come down and take any tourism away from Moab. We just want to ... be able to share in that ... (and) give the visitor a better experience where they can move between the two counties a little bit easier.”

Right now, she said, the Uinta Basin is “just kind of isolated on an island” by itself, cutting off visitors to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks — as well as Flaming Gorge

National Recreation Area and Dinosaur National Monument — from a more direct approach to Arches and Canyonlands national parks.

“You are our neighbor to the south, but to get here is a four-hour drive, because there’s no (direct) connecting route,” Coltharp said.

Uintah County Commission chair Bill Stringer attributed the board’s new focus to a “fair amount” of change in his board’s makeup, calling the present leadership’s era a “different day” in that county’s history. Moab’s distant neighbor to the north, he said, is “far more open” to outdoor recreation and tourism nowadays, as opposed to promoting “all oil and gas, all the time.”

“I think over the past 10 or 15 years, there’s a picture of Uintah County and perhaps Vernal that has become almost a cliché,” he said. “If you think of Vernal or you think of Uintah County or the Uinta Basin, you think about this, but there’s quite a bit more.”

It’s a shakeup, he said, that extends beyond the faces of the board's three new commissioners.

“There’s a change in the philosophy,” he said.

Stringer might best personify that change: He previously worked for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in

Moab from 1988 until 2004, when he went on to manage the agency's office in Vernal until 2014 or so. Since that time, he said, he pleaded "a little bit guilty" to exporting some of the outdoor recreation-focused ideas that took off while he was living in Grand County.

"There's a lot of things that are similar, but I think the hope is to become a little bit more diverse, and not be the cliched picture that you're used to seeing of oil wells everywhere (in the Uinta Basin)," he said.

Uintah County Commissioner Brad Horrocks told the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee as recently as August of last year that the federal government should eliminate unnecessary regulations and promote domestic energy resource development. Yet even as he touted a county resource management plan that calls on federal agencies to expedite the process to apply for and approve mineral leases in the Uinta Basin, Horrocks noted that he and his counterparts are working to diversify their economy.

"We would like to see it eventually help our tourism business up there," he told the county council.

In the future, Horrocks predicted that tourism will be a much greater force in the economic development of Uintah County and the Uinta Basin.

BOARD FACES SKEPTICISM FROM OPPONENTS OF PROPOSED BOOK CLIFFS HIGHWAY

Judging by the feedback that its commissioners heard during their April 16 meeting with the Grand County Council, Uintah County's delegation still has much work to do in making its case for a Book Cliffs highway.

Grand County Council member Jaylyn Hawks said she would rather see transportation funding go to existing paved corridors, instead of being diverted to a project that would pave a "near-wilderness area" and wintering grounds that big game species depend on.

"You guys have that same advantage as a tourism department," Hawks said. "Why can't you promote the wilderness areas of the Books, accessing them from your end? Because it's a totally different experience, and it's one of the last, quite frankly ... places like it in this part of the world."

Part of the skepticism toward the commission's vision is tied to the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition's own efforts to build a highway through the Book Cliffs. Much of its proposed corridor, the coalition says, will serve existing oil or gas sites and pipelines, with connecting roadways and pipelines to active or inactive energy production sites.

With those plans still on the drawing board, some environmentalists and other opponents of a paved north-to-south route through the Book Cliffs believe that Uintah County officials may be trying to “greenwash” the proposal.

“The Seven County Infrastructure Coalition and Uintah County commissioners are trying to hoodwink Grand County Council into thinking that they want this road for tourism, claiming that this route would significantly increase the connection between Dinosaur National Monument and Arches National Park,” said Moab resident Sarah Stock of Canyon Country Rising Tide, a group that has opposed the development of oil sands and oil shale resources in the Book Cliffs and Tavaputs Plateau. “This is simply not fact. The existing roads to Vernal have almost exactly the same travel time as the Book Cliffs Highway would. The only travel savings would go to the oil, gas and tar sands companies extracting resources out near PR Spring.”

Others have raised questions about the potential costs to build and maintain a Book Cliffs highway, and whether the State of Utah would incur those expenses, or leave local entities like Grand and Uintah counties to pick up the tab.

A September 2014 feasibility study estimated that it could cost anywhere between \$110 million to \$200 million to build a 41-mile paved road through East Canyon near the Utah-Colorado state line. In addition, the study found that annual

maintenance costs could reach millions of dollars — a potential concern, based on the Colorado Legislature’s continued reluctance to fund major improvements to Colorado State Highway 139 — one of two main routes that most travelers follow to get from Vernal to Moab.

“I think that that’s my main concern: We are talking about a really expensive, expensive project, which would be placed in Grand County, and unless (the Utah Department of Transportation) took over, we would be handed the bill to pay for the maintenance of it,” Grand County Council member Mary McGann said.

“Really, what it comes down to for me is, is the state going to step up for this?” Grand County Council member Greg Halliday added.



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Stringer is familiar with each of those concerns, having attended a meeting in Moab several years ago where “95 percent” of the negative comments came from local residents who did not want a “hydrocarbon highway” through the Book Cliffs.

It might come as a surprise to some Moab-area residents, but Stringer said the current members of Uintah County's commission agree with that stance.

"We are not in the least bit interested in that," he said.

"Tourism is something that is — we need to broaden our base, and we know it."

Uintah County's commissioners have since questioned much of that study, based on its mineral development emphasis.

"We said, 'I'm not sure why there's so much emphasis on minerals, when there are the other things that we were really looking at that were kind of minimized,'" he said. "And as you look at it today, our objections would have been very valid, because a lot of the value that they were attributing to it was from tar sands and oil shale (development), and that's just not going to happen."

Trucking is "absolutely the worst way" to move commodities, he said, and the most recent rail study of the Uinta Basin's shipping needs is examining alternative routes to Craig, Colorado, and Price.

"There is absolutely no discussion about bringing minerals through the Book Cliffs down to what used to be the old Cisco siding," he said. "That's just — it's gone. So what

we're looking at now is saying, we feel ... that's history, for all intents and purposes."

It's just an impression he has, Stringer said, but he believes in the past, state officials didn't want to get involved in the debate over the "hydrocarbon highway."

"Four years ago, I would say this was a contentious process, because the people that were pushing your road were pushing it for extraction," he said. "And I think Grand County was rightly concerned — at least, the citizens, were rightly concerned. I think if that road had been providing something other than a terminal point for oil and for tar sands coming out of the Book Cliffs, it might have been a different story, but that seemed to be its major purpose."

As far as state ownership goes, unless UDOT assumed ownership of the proposed route, he doesn't believe that either county would or could take care of it.

To be clear, Stringer said he can't commit every successive incarnation of the Uintah County Commission to the current board's position.

"But we can tell you that we would be interested in doing whatever needed to be done to be sure that that is exactly what we got: a highway for people, as opposed to commodities," he said.

COALITION'S APPLICATION SURPRISES SOME OFFICIALS

Some county officials lamented that they have had little say in the infrastructure coalition's process, even though the right-of-way would pass through federal lands in Grand County.

McGann said it bothered her to learn by accident that the coalition has submitted an application with the BLM for a federal right-of-way through the Book Cliffs.

"I was surprised that we heard about it through the grapevine," she said.

News of the coalition's application also appeared to catch Horrocks by surprise, even though he serves as the co-chair of its governing body. Stringer, meanwhile, said he can state categorically that Uintah County did not ask the coalition to file the application, and added that he's "a little disappointed" he didn't know about it.

"As I sit here, without knowing more about it, the reason we're here is because we think your business is more valuable to us than the (coalition's) business is," Stringer said. "... I see our future business prospects better with you than I do with a pipeline coming down there."

McGann noted that when the coalition was being

developed, residents in Grand County were told that it would never push anything on the county that it didn't want.

"And we find out they signed for a right-of-way, knowing full well that Grand County (doesn't want it)," she said. "I'm not blaming you, now that I know you, too, were caught in the dark ... (But) this sends up a whole bunch of red flags about that coalition, that they're not only not communicating with (Grand) County that they're talking about impacting; they're not communicating with their entire board."

However, Grand County Council member Curtis Wells said he begged to differ, telling McGann and others that the coalition previously reached out to local officials and told them about its plans.

"The SCIC did start kicking our tires very informally," he said.

If all of the entities are going to work together, Wells said, a good place to start is to determine how they will negotiate and find a better arrangement for the right-of-way. It's important for Grand County to have a controlling interest in the process, he said, whether or not it's a member of the coalition.

While Hawks voiced her own personal reservations about the highway idea, she joked that Uintah County's delegation

might succeed if it can put a dent in the sheer numbers of visitors who flock to Moab each year, making some of her constituents feel overwhelmed — and even besieged.

“I was thinking that you’d have a better shot at this, of getting our concurrence, if you guarantee to take tourists away (from Grand County),” she said, to laughter from the audience.

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