

# Book Cliffs highway on again

## Coalition adds highway back to active project list, in search of infrastructure funding

The Seven-County Infrastructure Coalition, a group of counties in southeast Utah, excluding Grand County, voted unanimously May 21 to put the Eastern Utah Regional Connection, known locally as the proposed Book Cliffs Highway, back on its active projects list.

A coalition of seven counties surrounding Grand voted last month to add the proposed Book Cliffs highway — a project that lays entirely within Grand County — back to its list of active projects, in the hopes of securing federal funding amid talks in Congress of an infrastructure bill. Photo by Carter Pape

The decision reverses course from a unanimous vote in December to remove the project from the active project list. Mike McKee, the director of the coalition, told The Times-Independent at the time that the move was made in hopes of working with Grand County on a path forward on the subject.

“What we were hoping to do is to work closely with [Grand] county to find a way forward,” McKee said in December. He added at the time that he was hoping to return to the subject of an eastern Utah connector, but “Grand County has to be part of it,” and suspending work on it, he hoped, might allow

the counties to "start fresh."

On Wednesday, June 2, when asked about the board's decision to put the highway back on the active projects list, McKee said members believed there might be federal funding available for the project in the coming months and years, referencing ongoing discussions in Congress about an infrastructure bill proposed by President Joe Biden.

The Grand County Commission responded at its next meeting with a brief letter to express concern about the decision.

"There are many projects the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition could undertake that would benefit many, such as improving broadband in rural areas, improvement of water infrastructure, creation of solar or wind farms," the letter reads. "The cost of the Eastern Utah Regional Connection far outweighs the benefits it will bring to the region. It is a controversial project and will face considerable opposition."

The commission voted unanimously on Tuesday, June 1 to ratify Chair Mary McGann's signature on the letter, which she sent prior to the coalition's vote.

McKee said McGann had requested time to speak at the next meeting of the coalition, scheduled for June 18, to speak to the matter of the Book Cliffs Highway.

McGann, a liberal member of the commission, and former Grand County Commissioner Curtis Wells, a conservative, spoke at the coalition's meeting in December to voice their support for the decision to remove the highway from the active projects list. Wells and McGann framed it as an olive branch that could potentially lead to Grand County rejoining the coalition.

"I'd love someday to see her [McGann] up there in a seat with you all, with Grand County as a member of this coalition," Wells said in December.

McGann had said that she would be willing to have Grand rejoin, but only on the condition that it could veto projects like the highway.

"The only way we would join the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition is if they change their bylaws so that a county that a project was being planned for could veto the project if they didn't like it," McGann said in December.

McGann was not immediately available for comment. Grand County Commission Vice Chair Gabe Woytek said that he is "always down to collaborate and make partnerships whenever possible, even when there have been historical conflicts."

However, he said, adding the highway back to the active

project list would essentially “put a screeching halt” to having Grand County rejoin the coalition.

When asked about the prospect of infrastructure funding being pushed by Democrats in Congress going toward a project like the Book Cliffs Highway, Woytek said there was “no shortage of infrastructure needs” across Utah, including in southeast Utah, and that many of them were higher priorities than the proposed highway through a relished, largely undeveloped area in the county.