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To: suel@mailman.xmission.com
From: Lance Christie <atl@frontiernet.net>
Subject: [SUEL] Book Cliffs road dumb idea

Regarding the current initiative to "analyze and determine economic impacts and funding for development of a highway through the Bookcliffs" as Action Step 3, Objective 4 under Goal 2: "Provide sufficient infrastructure and community facilities to meet development needs" in the Grand County Five-Year Economic Development Plan now before the public for review and comment:

Back in 1992 when the County Council form of government was voted in and Jimmy Walker and Co. were voted out of office, two of the three former Republican County Commissioners formed a road board with the father of the third ousted Commissioner to utilize mineral lease monies independent of the county council to build the Book Cliffs Highway. I evaluated their proposal, including going over the entire route on the ground (including Winter Ridge on foot) and looking up all the BLM and USGS geophysical information on it.

I found the Book Cliffs Highway to be a colossal boondoggle for several reasons. The "bottom line" was that the highway seemed a very large and ongoing investment to gain a low probable return in county economic and tax base benefit. I will list them in the order of the importance I attached to them as reasons to not invest discretionary county funds in building the road:

1. Particularly in the Parachute Member of the Green River Formation near the top of the climb up the Book Cliffs, one encounters clay/shale layers which are very unstable. Engineering reports circa 1992 speak to the problems this poses to roadbed stability, and thus the likelihood of land movement taking chunks of the road out or cracking it, resulting in high recurring maintenance costs. Also, a number of the stream crossings drain large watersheds which produce prodigious amounts of water in heavy rains. These regularly wash out existing county road crossings, which, being dirt, are easily restored by Dave Warner & Co. with county earthmoving equipment. Landslides are also easily dealt with on a dirt road with county road equipment, and are, year after year. You can put a paved skid pad across these wash crossings which works to stabilize them, but that doesn't meet Class A highway standards; it only meets Class B (county) road standards. A road with skid pad stream crossings will be closed to traffic during high

runoff events; or else tourist vehicles will be washed downstream by the force of the water if they are foolish enough to try to ford the wash in flood. We already have Class B road access over the Book Cliffs; I've driven the route a number of times from here to Vernal in my pickup trucks; it is quite doable in a Honda Civic with a competent driver. Putting in bridges large enough to not get washed out by fairly routine floods is an expensive proposition; putting in bridges which are too small guarantees the highway will be closed every couple of years by bridges being washed out; replacing such bridges requires weeks to accomplish if funding is available. As Munich Re and other casualty reinsurance underwriters have documented, the frequency and severity of flood-caused casualty losses has increased very significantly in the last decade and the trend line is steeply upwards.

Another issue: the geophysical reports on the various routes for the Book Cliffs Highway in 1992 found that, as one went east, each route was worse than the last in terms of the total amount of unstable land crossed, and therefore the ability to maintain an intact paved highway over the route. The easternmost route was preferred for this reason: it was the best of a bad lot; that is the route I evaluated. The engineering reports specifically recommended that nobody even consider the other routes; they had so many problems they were clearly not feasible to consider further.

In summary, the geology and hydrology of the route of a highway to gain access from the south to the plateau on top of the Book Cliffs is highly adverse to building a stable roadbase for a paved two-lane Class A road. No matter how much you spend on building it, you will have sections which are likely to give way and have to be rebuilt on a fairly routine basis; in the meanwhile the road will be closed. If you cut corners to keep construction costs down, the amount of time the road will be closed to traffic to affect repair of landslides and washed out bridges will increase, and so will annual maintenance costs. It is fiscally irresponsible to invest vast sums of money in a construction project which will predictably not work part of the time (which discourages its use for industry and tourism) and which will cost a lot to keep working part of the time.

2. The proposed route of the Book Cliffs Highway was of no use to either existing or potential energy development and production on the Book Cliffs.

Oil and gas deposits (in Pennsylvanian-epoch formations) and oil shale deposits (in the Parachute Formation) become steadily thinner, smaller, and more widely separated from one another as you come west from the Colorado state line on top of the Book Cliffs. The proposed route of the highway in 1992 was along the ridge immediately outside the east boundary of the Ute reservation - effectively the western boundary of any economically

recoverable deposits; if you go east or west from this route going north-south you encounter substantial drainage canyons which push the cost of road construction up because of grades and stream crossings. Existing oil and gas well service access either occurs from the east side in Colorado, or when the existing Grand County access roads to the top of the Book Cliffs are used, oilfield service trucks travel this ridge route and then turn off on roads that travel between drainages east to west. A paved highway in Grand County does not offer any significant advantage to oil, gas, and oil shale or tar sands interests which would induce development of the relatively sparse fossil fuel resources in Grand County on the Book Cliffs: it doesn't have a significant effect on oil industry access or the cost of access to these deposits. Deposits that are not being developed currently are dormant because they require the price of a barrel of oil to rise high enough to make it economically profitable to develop them, e.g., about \$85/barrel or more in the long run to motivate investment in processing oil shale deposits. Travel time and cost to access these deposits on current Class B roads versus a paved highway are not different enough to make change when it becomes financially profitable for petroleum companies to proceed with oil, gas, shale, or tar sands deposit development.

3. Analysis of the probable increase in tourist traffic reaching Moab and spending money in Grand County with or without the Book Cliffs Highway in place did not show much economic benefit accruing from tourism enhancement due to the highway.

It appears to me that the motive for considering building the Book Cliffs Highway in the county's Economic Development Plan lies in the intuition on the part of some Councilmen and others in the community that this highway would:

(1) be instrumental in advancing the Plan's Goal 2 "support efforts to appropriately develop..." oil and gas natural resources, which produces substantial tax revenues to the county. If existing environmental regulations are scrupulously observed by oil and gas development and the activity is appropriately placed (Action Step 1, Objective 1, Goal 3), one can make the case that this form of development has far less detrimental impact on the Grand County environment than certain forms of off-road motorized recreation, while producing far more in net tax revenues (gross revenues minus cost of infrastructure services like law enforcement) to the county. (Economic cost-benefit analysis of oil and gas development is Action Step 2, Objective 1, Goal 3)

(2) enhance motorized tour visitation by tourists driving family vehicles and RVs, who are more likely to purchase meals, lodging, supplies and services from Grand County merchants and less likely to impact the

backcountry than are off-road enthusiasts who trailer their off-road machines in and often camp out in the backcountry they are riding over.

I have no quarrel with either Goal 3 or Goal 7 in the draft county Economic Development Plan. My quarrel is with a Book Cliffs Highway being a cost-effective means of advancing either goal. I do not think it is for the above-stated reasons, and the evidence that this is true is sufficiently strong that I think it would be a waste of our time and resources to pursue further evaluation of building a Book Cliffs Highway with monies which Grand County can choose to expend on more cost-beneficial enterprises.
-Lance Christie

The Book Cliffs road is the reason Rex wanted to eliminate the cities' Economic Development Plan and develop a county plan. A new state law that I believe was passed last year makes it easier for the county to allocate mineral lease money to building the Book Cliffs Road. Does anyone have more details? I will attend the Council Meeting.

Bill Love

At 12:18 PM 6/16/2005, you wrote:
I nominate the following for the Dumbest Idea Award:

Resurrecting the Book Cliffs Highway

It was dumb back in 1992 when it was soundly rejected.
It's still dumb today.

So why is it included in the joint county/city draft five-year Economic Development work plan?

That plan has yet to be adopted by either body (and there are big issues to be resolved before it gets passed). But I think it's important to knock the Book Cliffs Highway off the list immediately, before things get very far.

The Econ Dev Plan has been removed from the council's regular agenda, which means folks will be allowed to speak about it during the Citizens to be Heard session at the start of the meeting. It would be great if a few folks would stand up during the Citizens to be Heard and simply say:

- * The Book Cliffs Road idea should be dropped the work plan
- * A road from Cisco to Vernal makes no sense for boosting tourism in Moab.
- * Oil companies don't need a paved highway to I-70. Let them bear the expense of adding culverts and gravel to the existing roads if they need

that in order to get to their well pads during wet winters.

* Citizens were overwhelmingly against it back in 1992. If anything, public sentiment is probably even more against it now.

* We don't need to waste taxpayer money (Ken Davy's staff time) chasing something the citizens don't want and will probably kill as soon as it gets up a head of steam.

* We have limited resources. Let's spend it on the things that have broad public support.

Anyone who wants details about the Book Cliffs Highway can contact me. I've got a copy of the EIS from 1992 with several different road alignments and a map. Who knows if a 2005 version would run along similar lines, but it's probably the best place to start in getting up to speed. -Franklin Seal

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