

Book Cliffs Highway project canceled

Alison Harford and Rachel Fixsen, Moab Sun News
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Book Cliffs Highway project suspended

Book Cliffs highway still unpopular

On March 10, the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition—which includes Carbon, Daggett, Duchesne, Emery, Sevier, San Juan, and Uintah counties—voted to cancel planning for the controversial Book Cliffs Highway, a paved 35-mile road that would have connected Vernal to Moab. The vote was split 4 to 3, with representatives from Carbon, Emery, San Juan, and Sevier counties voting to cancel the project. The proposed highway would've been built in Grand County, but Grand County is not a part of the SCIC and has long been opposed to the project.

Grand County commissioners, at their Mar. 15 meeting, voted unanimously to approve a letter to the SCIC applauding the decision to cancel the environmental assessment process for the highway.

“We hope this decision is permanent,” the letter says. “Having actively opposed this project for more than 30 years, we would prefer to not waste another minute fighting this shortsighted proposal.”

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The highway, also known as the Eastern Utah Regional Connector, has been canceled and revived multiple times since it was introduced by the SCIC. Most recently it was tabled in December 2020 following opposition from Grand County and a lack of funding—in 2019, the SCIC found that the road was estimated to cost between \$200 and \$400 million.

It was revived again in May 2021, when the SCIC thought there could be an influx of funds from a federal infrastructure package. At the time, the SCIC said the project could increase tourism in Uintah County and provide a shorter route between Vernal and Moab; however, in the June SCIC meeting, Grand County

Commissioner Mary McGann, who was the commission chair at the time, pointed out that in comparison to established routes, the highway would save only about 20 minutes for travelers and would take away traffic through towns like Helper and Green River.

At the most recent meeting of the SCIC, the counties who voted to cancel the project said they were concerned that Grand County was still opposed to the project and they believed the SCIC was spreading itself too thin.



The project would “decrease the amount of funding to the rest of the roads in our communities,” Carbon County Commissioner Casey Hopes said. He said the SCIC should focus its efforts on its current projects, including the Uinta Basin Railway, another controversial project that would transport oil from eastern Utah; and the San Rafael Energy Research Center, a facility that will research mixed fuel combustion.

“I just think this dilutes what energy we do have,” he said.

For now, the project is canceled, but commissioners who voted to continue planning the highway still want to see it through.

“I’m of the mind that we’ll get it built when we can, or when it makes more sense,” said Daggett County Commissioner Jack Lytle.

County Attorney Christina Sloan said that the SCIC Chair Mike McKee had provided Grand County with copies of the SCIC’s request to withdraw their right-of-way application to the Bureau of Land Management, and of the BLM’s confirmation that the application was deemed withdrawn.

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