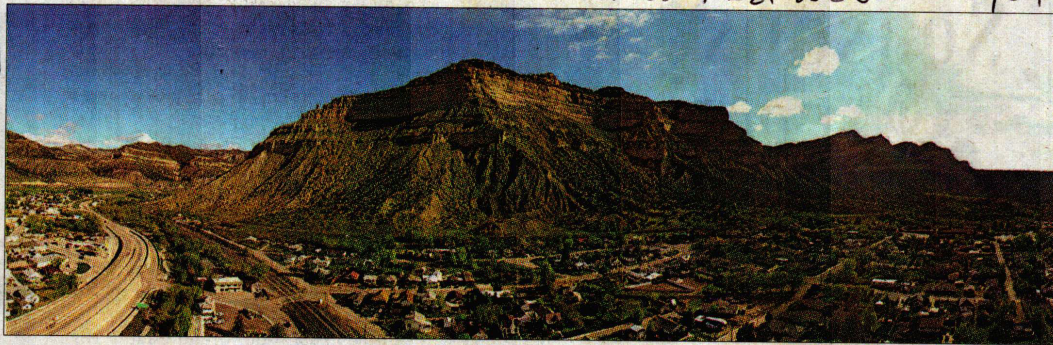


Book Cliffs highway effort suspended; funds reallocated

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The Book Cliffs, seen here from Helper, have long been the subject of attention in Grand County. A controversial plan to build a highway through the expansive geologic formation was suspended Friday, to the great relief of Grand County Commission Chair Mary McGann, long a key opponent of the project.

Photo by CMWarnock/Wikimedia Commons

Counties look to fold Grand back into regional infrastructure coalition

By Carter Pape
The Times-Independent

The coalition of counties surrounding Grand that for years has pushed to construct the Eastern Utah Regional Connection, better known to Moabites as the Book Cliffs highway, has suspended the project. In approving the change, county commissioners alluded to the possibility of folding Grand County back into the coalition, with two key Grand commissioners echoing the call.

"Moving forward, we look forward to discussing opportunities to collaborate on projects and concepts that are beneficial for Grand County, the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition, and the member counties," said Grand County Chair Mary McGann.

Grand County Commissioner Curtis Wells echoed many of McGann's sentiments to the coalition board, saying he "really appreciated the concept and the mission of the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition," which he said was "growing in importance," and expressed his hope that McGann could represent Grand in 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.

The board of the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition, which consists of counties from San Juan to Daggett and Sevier — but not Grand — voted Friday, Dec. 18 to shelve the divisive roadbuilding project. The change came in response to

longstanding but recently elevated backlash from Grand County, which stood to host the majority of the project connecting Uintah County to Interstate 70.

At the same meeting, the board approved a budget for 2021 that would

allow for spending the roughly \$3 million proposed for roadway study instead on rehabilitating Seep Ridge Road in Uintah County. Seep Ridge is the Uintah-owned road that the coalition had proposed to be a part

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of the Eastern Utah Regional Connection.

Repurposing those funds is subject to the approval of the Utah Legislature, which had provided the coalition the money specifically to conduct an environmental impact study prior to the construction of the Eastern Utah Regional Connection.

To the question of why the coalition was suspending efforts on the project, Mike McKee, the coalition's executive director, said he recommended the board move away from it because "it seemed like the right thing to do." He pointed to misunderstandings and miscommunications regarding the intent of the project as primary reasons that discussions over it collapsed.

"What we were hoping to do is to work closely with [Grand] county to find a way forward," McKee told The Times-Independent. He said 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."

When asked if he was hoping to have Grand County rejoin the coalition of counties — a coalition it left in 2015 over the Book Cliffs Highway matter — he said it "isn't the reason"

he recommended the coalition suspend the project, but he did hope to see a reunification.

"There are so many things we can be united on," McKee said.

McKee is a former Uintah County Commissioner and among the group that originally backed the project. While it started as a road meant for moving oil, the pitch had since shifted.

"The Eastern Utah Regional Connection would provide a more direct route between nationally important recreation areas such as Yellowstone, Flaming Gorge, Dinosaur National Monument, Arches, Canyonlands, and the Grand Canyon," the county coalition's website reads.

Representatives from Daggett and Duchesne counties, Jack Lytle and Greg Miles, respectively, expressed regret suspending the project, which the coalition has pursued and studied in some form for decades.

"It is disappointing to not have the relationships or the commonality of thought to be able to go forward with something like that," Lytle said.

Lytle and Miles each ultimately joined their colleagues on the board in a unanimous 6-0 vote in favor of suspending the project. San

Juan County Commissioner Willie Grayeyes did not attend the meeting.

According to McGann, the coalition's decisions Friday signaled the possibility of a fresh start between Grand County and the coalition, long an embattled couple by virtue of the proposed highway. But under what conditions might Grand County rejoin the coalition?

"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 told The Times-Independent following the Friday meeting.