

Coalition allocates funds for Phase 2 of Book Cliffs Highway

Funds for the second phase of a highway project through the Book Cliffs, linking Uintah County with Interstate 70 in Grand County were approved in late February.

The Seven County Infrastructure Coalition (SCIC) awarded \$3.3 million during a meeting on Feb. 21 in a unanimous vote. The second phase of the project is environmental work leading up to an environmental impact statement. Estimates show the project will cost about \$160 million with slightly over \$1 million per year in maintenance costs.

In 2014, Seep Ridge Road, also known as the Book Cliffs Highway, was paved from Ouray to the Grand County line with about \$60 million in funds routed through mineral lease payments to a special service district. Uintah County officials hoped the road would be completed linking Highway 40 with Interstate 70, but the project ran into opposition in Grand County.

SCIC says the route streamlines travel in the region and would draw tourists from National Parks in southeast Utah.

However, a Grand County official expects oil and natural gas companies would profit from the new highway but for tourism, the savings in travel time don't justify the costs.

Troy Ostler, owner of CIVCO Engineering in Vernal, said SCIC executed a contract modification with his firm to develop baseline environmental data for the Moab Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office. BLM officials will then assemble an environmental impact statement (EIS).

"It should take about two years," Ostler said. "What we are doing is establishing baseline data to be used by BLM to develop the right-of-way application."

Over the next year, Ostler says a draft report and a public comment period will commence. Open houses will provide another opportunity for the public to learn about the project. After the EIS is finalized, another public comment period will begin.

Phase one of the project developed proposed alignments for the highway. Previously there was discussion over two different routes in Grand County – East Canyon or Hay Canyon.

Ostler said SCIC selected East Canyon as their preferred alignment. BLM will consider both as well as other potential alignments as the EIS is written.

"It's based mostly on the least amount of environmental impacts," Ostler said. "Construction cost estimates between East and Hay canyons are almost identical but there are several wilderness study areas that abut Hay Canyon Road, so East Canyon appears to have fewer impacts."

He added that multiple alignments have been studied over several years and East Canyon appears to have fewer environmental impacts and is in the bottom range regarding cost.

Property ownership in the SCIC's preferred route includes BLM, Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands and one private property owner. There is also a route that avoids private land, Ostler said.

According to a study funded by SCIC, the new highway would increase tourism in the Uintah Basin by 61,000 annual visits and create a direct route from Moab to Dinosaur National Monument, Flaming Gorge and on to Teton and Yellowstone national parks. The study, conducted by Parsons Brinkerhoff, Salt Lake City, estimates the creation of 869 new tourism jobs, 367 energy-related jobs, and a \$132 million annual increase in gross domestic product for the Uinta Basin.

"By improving access to the region, the study corridor would decrease the travel costs to national and state parks

as well as other outdoor recreational destinations," according to the study. "The decreased costs would, in turn, increase the demand for tourism, increasing the spending associated with tourism industries."

Mary McGann, chair of the Grand County Council, who was elected in 2014 over a candidate who supported SCIC and the Book Cliffs Highway proposal, said oil and gas companies will benefit because the highway would provide a closer route to the interstate rail system that roughly follows I-70 near Green River.

"For people who want to vacation and travel, it only saves a half-hour at most and that's a whole lot of money to spend to save a half-hour," McGann said. "I find it hard to believe when they try to say this highway is not to enhance the movement of product."

McGann added that if Uintah County wants to beef up tourism they should spend money promoting Dinosaur National Monument. She said Grand County currently has all the tourists it can handle.

The Book Cliffs Highway has not recently been under consideration by the Grand County Council, but McGann said she learned about SCIC's selection of East Canyon as its preferred alternative second-hand.

"The fact that they (SCIC) moved ahead with this proposal to build the road through East Canyon without ever talking to us did not sit well," she said.

In a 1992 draft environmental analysis of the project, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources opposed the Book Cliffs Highway project because of various wildlife concerns and the increased potential for wildlife /vehicle collisions.

However, the wildlife agency's concerns were alleviated when SCIC agreed to build six wildlife underpasses along the new highway.

Faith Jolley, UDWR public information officer released the following statement to UB Media this week: "DWR worked with the county on the first phase of this project and are grateful for the county in implementing six wildlife underpasses, which will help reduce wildlife/vehicle collisions. DWR will continue to work with the county and other partners as needed to help reduce impacts to wildlife in this area."

The SCIC study predicts a reduction of 118,000 daily vehicle miles traveled, therefore providing an environmental benefit. "The study corridor is not expected to cause significant air quality impacts and would provide some dust particulate reduction as a result of roadway paving," according to the study.

Opponents call that line of logic “greenwashing.” A highway used to haul crude oil and natural gas closer to refineries in no way reduces overall carbon emissions.

Canyon Country Rising Tide’s (CCRT) published list of talking points states the Book Cliffs Highway would only save 15 to 25 minutes in travel time between Vernal and Moab. They say the costs of the project and ongoing maintenance are outlandish and because SCIC is primarily funded through the Utah Community Impact Fund Board the Book Cliffs Highway project is and will continue to take money away from more valuable rural projects throughout Utah such as care facilities, libraries, recreation centers, bridges, and water projects.