

# Commissioners attempt to revive Book Cliffs Highway

Uintah County commissioners traveled to Moab in late April in an attempt to resuscitate a north-south transportation corridor linking Interstate 70 and Highway 40.

The pitch, that finishing the last 40 miles of the Book Cliffs highway from the Uintah / Grand county line to I-70, would increase tourist traffic, met a luke-warm reception among Grand County Council members who were unaware that the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition (SCIC) had already requested funding for the project from the Utah Community Impact Board (CIB), as reported by the Moab Times-Independent.

Uintah County commissioners said they are interested in tapping into tourism because oil, gas and mining revenues are flat.

"We need to broaden our base," said Bill Stringer, Uintah County Commission chairman. "We were tied to mining and when it went away tourism was the last straw to grab for."

Proponents foresee a highway linking Utah's Big 5 National Parks with Dinosaur National Monument, Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area, Grand Teton and Yellowstone

national parks.

Opponents say the highway's proposed routes through Grand County are too steep and costs are too high. Further, they argue it won't save much time in comparison to traveling through Price and over Indian Canyon, or over Douglas Pass in western Colorado.

Uintah County completed paving a 45-mile section of the Book Cliffs Highway in November 2014. The \$60 million project was paid for with mineral lease funds awarded by CIB. What has become known as "The Road to Nowhere," runs from just south of Ouray to the Grand County line. Uintah County's interest in revitalizing the project is obvious with such a large investment made and little to no benefit except for providing a smoother ride for oil field traffic servicing numerous wells in the area.

But the project created political upheaval in Grand County, which hasn't mellowed much, according to reports in both Moab newspapers. Grand County withdrew from SCIC when it became obvious that a majority of Coalition members would vote in favor of the Book Cliffs Highway in spite of their opposition.

According to the Moab Sun News, routes connecting the existing Book Cliffs Highway with I-70 under study include either Segoe, Hay or East canyons. Each route has complex

issues as all three cross parcels of state, private, and federal lands. Wildlife habitat and some Wilderness Study Areas may be impacted.

A feasibility study completed in September 2014 estimated construction costs of between \$110 million to \$200 million for 41 miles of road up through East Canyon. Annual maintenance cost for the twisting road that reaches an altitude of 8,400 feet is estimated at \$1.2 million.

SCIC Executive Director Mike McKee told the Moab Sun News in 2017 that putting the project on the state's priority list is part of the discussion and that Grand County residents wouldn't be on the hook for construction costs or maintenance.

However, the Utah Department of Transportation's long-range transportation plan makes no mention of the Book Cliffs highway.

SCIC's website refers to the project as the Eastern Utah Regional Connection. It lists the project in the priority evaluation phase and states that it would relieve truck traffic, increase public safety and provide recreational access.

"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," according to SCIC.

During the April meeting in Moab, Grand County Council member Mary McGann questioned why SCIC sought funding for the project without notifying Grand County. Uintah County Commissioner Brad Horrocks, who is SCIC's co-chairman said he was unaware of the coalition's request.