

# County not keen on Book Cliffs highway

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## Uintah seeks to draw Moab guests, but Grand could pay lion's share



Members of the Grand County Council and Uintah County Commission meet Tuesday to discuss a proposal to link the two counties via new highway. *Photo by Doug McMurdo*

A plan by Uintah County to connect Grand and Uintah counties by extending the Seep Ridge Road – also known as the Book Cliffs Highway – was met with a friendly but lukewarm response during a discussion Tuesday.

Uintah County Commissioners Brad Horrocks and Bill Stringer noted that mining and the oil and gas lease industries have faltered in the county north of Grand and, in an effort to bolster and diversify its lagging economy, they hope to tap into Moab's robust tourism market.

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

Most of the highway is in Grand County, noted Grand County Council Member Mary McGann, who said it would cost between \$143 and \$170 million to build – and \$1 million a year for maintenance, an annual cost Grand County would be on the hook for if the Utah Department of Transportation did not classify it as a state highway, said McGann.

There were also concerns over the involvement of the Seven Counties Infrastructure Coalition, which Grand belonged to until it left the group four years ago. An apparently vexed McGann noted the coalition requested money for the highway from the Community Impact Board, without anyone letting Grand County know of its intent.

Horrocks, who is in a leadership position on the coalition, said he was unaware of the coalition's request. There is a level of distrust in Grand County toward the coalition and Horrocks conceded the state has noted concerns with its

accountability and provided "strict" guidance on how it is to proceed.

Stringer made it clear the Uintah County Commission did not request that the coalition ask for funding for the highway, which would run from Highway 40 in the north to Danish Flats at Interstate 70 in the south. Whether it would use the interstate or Highway 128 to get to Cisco is one of many questions that need to be answered.

Council Member Curtis Wells voiced a number of concerns with the plan related to the uncertainty over which government entity would own the financially valuable easement, which would "provide a lot of revenue," a need for reform in the management of the coalition, and questions regarding a decision on what the purpose of the road would be.

"Our business with you is more important than our business with SCIC (the coalition)," said Stringer.

While the issue is sure to create controversy as it has in the past, the soonest work could begin if it were approved is likely six years away. In the interim, the Bureau of Land Management would have to perform a \$1 million environmental assessment that the National Environmental Policy Act requires before a shovel ever hits the ground.

The idea is to provide tourists a shortcut between Moab and Vernal, which is currently a four-hour drive, but resident Stephanie Stocks said the highway would shave only a few minutes off that drive. Stringer told her it would likely cut the time by 45 minutes.

Stringer assured Grand County officials it was not Uintah County's goal to steal tourists away from Grand County, prompting Council Member Jaylyn Hawks to make a comment that many residents would likely cheer when she said early in the discussion, "It would be easier to get our concurrence if you could guarantee taking tourists away."