

THE ASPEN TIMES

Bad news on horizon for expanded Highway 82

'Peak-hour gridlock' will affect four-lane road in 2009, CDOT says

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Note: This is the first of a two-part series on the traffic problems of Highway 82. The second installment will run Friday.

ASPEN — Commuters on Highway 82 better enjoy 2008 — it could be the last year of relatively easy going before traffic clogs key points throughout the valley, state and local studies have concluded.

The state government invested \$250 million to expand Highway 82 to four lanes from Basalt to Buttermilk. The project, completed in the fall of 2004, drastically improved traffic flow and safety. But the added capacity was just a temporary fix. The four-lane highway will “approach peak-hour gridlock at critical locations as early as 2009,” a travel demand forecast by the Colorado Department of Transportation concluded.

Many commuters would argue that the congestion occurred sooner than expected. The booming economy of the Roaring Fork Valley draws thousands of workers in and out of Aspen every day. Construction of Base Village at Snowmass spills scores of dump trucks and cement mixers onto the highway.

It's not just the upper valley that's feeling the pinch. Vehicles are typically stacked deeper at stoplights in El Jebel and Basalt than skiers in a lift line during the holidays.

A decade ago, a few lonely vehicles were making the trip to Aspen at 6:30 on cold, dark winter mornings. Now, there is a continuous ribbon of light snaking along at that time. The commuter crunch starts earlier and extends later into the morning than ever before. So much for “rush hour.”

Extra buses, greater demand

Kent Blackmer, co-director of operations for the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA), which runs the valley's bus system, said one rider told him the buses have become too crowded for his tastes at 6:30 a.m., so he started riding earlier. RFTA keeps adding buses at key departure points during the morning commute to try to match demand.

Emma resident George Newman has made the commute to Aspen for almost 30 years. The traffic seems to grow exponentially every couple of years, he said.

“It just continues to grow,” Newman said. “At 7:30 (in the morning) it's a steady line of traffic through Basalt.”

He doesn't see any relief, with Aspen adding jobs and downvalley adding large subdivisions.

Newman regularly catches the bus to his office in the Aspen Airport Business Center and said there rarely is a problem finding a seat at 7:40 a.m. It's a different story on return trips on buses that depart between 4:15 and 4:45 p.m.

"Those buses are full, and usually it's standing-room only," he said.

Aspen entrance unresolved

While traffic volumes are growing enough to frustrate motorists in the midvalley, the Entrance to Aspen continues to be every commuter's nightmare. The two upvalley-bound lanes funnel into one at Buttermilk and traffic crawls into Aspen. At times commuters can cover the 17 miles from El Jebel to Buttermilk quicker than the 3 miles from Buttermilk to Aspen.

Ironically, all those millions of dollars invested in the highway expansion created a situation in which commuters hurry up and wait. Gains made in the expanded sections are lost waiting in traffic after Buttermilk.

A study by the city of Aspen concluded that commuters heading into town in the morning and out of town in the afternoon have adjusted their habits since 2005 because of the congestion.

"Under already saturated conditions, it is not possible to pass more traffic through the corridor during the peak hour in 2005; instead, increases in 2005 traffic volumes have resulted in extended peak hour lines and a longer duration of congestion," the city study said.

Soaring traffic levels

If no improvements are made at the Entrance to Aspen, traffic levels on Highway 82 at Cemetery Lane will jump from about 28,000 vehicles per day during the summer of 2005 to 44,800 vehicles per day in 2030, according to the city's estimates. The commute will also worsen downvalley.

"By 2030, increasing down valley traffic volumes will also have the effect of extending congestion and worsening the traffic flow along the entire down valley corridor," the study said.

Without bus service, the Roaring Fork Valley would suffer complete gridlock. RFTA hauled more than 4 million passengers in 2007, a record for the agency. The political fate of the Entrance to Aspen is unsettled because of a battle between advocates of four lanes of unrestricted traffic and an equally large contingent favoring a solution more oriented to mass transit.

Elsewhere in the valley, further expansion of Highway 82 isn't an option. "CDOT has indicated that funding does not exist to widen the highway to six lanes, even if this were desirable," a RFTA study said. So bus service appears to be a key to avoiding gridlock.

On Friday: Local officials are working to secure funding for a plan unofficially dubbed "RFTA on steroids." The Aspen Times will look at the details of that plan.

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