



Solutions to traffic issues frustrate valley officials

By DAVID FREY
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It's not a new story. The people who work in the town can't afford to live in the town, so they commute. Traffic congestion worsens. Domestic violence rates worsen. Quality of life worsens.

The story could be about Aspen, or Carbondale, or Glenwood. Now, Rifle, once considered the affordable alternative to more expensive upvalley towns, is the latest to voice the same complaints.

"It's very sad," said city official Sandy Vaccaro. The town has trouble attracting new police officers

there, he said, because Rifle can't afford to pay them enough to live there.

Vaccaro's concerns offered one more example of how downvalley communities are sharing the same problems with their upvalley neighbors.

Vaccaro was among representatives from Rifle, Silt, Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, Aspen and Eagle and Pitkin counties who gathered in Carbondale Thursday night in a transportation roundtable more to share problems than to reach solutions.

The discussion was hosted by Healthy Mountain Communities, a nonprofit group that studies regional issues.

The meeting was one of numerous recent meetings between area governments to discuss growth problems they face, which often result more in discussions than solutions.

That tendency frustrated Pitkin County Commissioner Mick Ireland, who angrily urged officials to throw away their agenda and delve into more substantive topics.

"If we put the schedule in front of the objective, we're not going to get anything done," he said. "Are we really serious about doing this and having valley-wide discussions?"

Ireland used Thursday's meeting to push his own

"save and build" approach to a valley rail system, which he said looks beyond current transportation problems to save money to solve anticipated transportation woes expected 20 years forward.

Ireland's plan would set aside revenues from a half-cent tax for rail, and form a 1-mill taxing district between Aspen and El Jebel, placing those monies in an escrow account. Voters would need to approve construction of the rail system when funds were available. In the meantime, two new lanes would be built on Highway 82 to relieve S-curve congestion.

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TRAFFIC

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Aspen's Mayor John Bennett made a plea for a valley rail system. "We're not going to solve this problem very quickly," he said. "Rail gives us a solution to solve this problem in a very humane way."

In the interim, said Dan Blankenship, manager of the Roaring Fork Transit Agency, "we're what you've got right now and we need your help."

Faced with a major funding shortfall and a need to replace 40 buses, Blankenship said the valley transit agency needs \$1.5 million more a year in funding from valley governments, in addition to its

planned 35-cent fare increase.

While communities from Rifle to Aspen all expressed some common themes over problems of congestion, other issues are just as strikingly different. While Aspen struggles through its entrance-to-Aspen debate, Silt official Don Sarver said his town is considering its first traffic signal.

"We don't spend a lot of time talking about transportation," he said. "We spend a lot of time about subdivisions."

Although upvalley governments are sometimes turned to for answers to emerging growth problems, Pitkin County Commissioner Leslie Lamont said, they may not have all the answers.

After the initial discussion during Thursday's meeting, valley officials will gather again Sept. 26.