

Group debates merits of transportation district

BY JOHN STROUD

A regional transportation district covering Garfield, Pitkin and the southwest corner of Eagle County could raise approximately \$4 million a year using a four-tenths of one cent sales tax, based on rough numbers presented to the ad hoc Regional Transportation Roundtable last week.

In addition, a \$10 per vehicle registration fee in each of the affected counties could raise another \$745,000 to \$818,000 per year over the next seven years.

Both funding mechanisms are among the limited options provided in Colorado's new Rural Transportation Authority Law. Others include tolls or fees for use of district-owned roads or transit systems (not state highways), as well as local improvement districts.

The law was passed by the State Legislature earlier this year and allows rural areas to seek voter approval within pre-defined regions to create transportation districts, similar to the Denver Metro area's Regional Transportation District (RTD).

Whether the figures arrived at using the local model would be enough to build and operate a transportation district and some type of as-yet undetermined transit system isn't known at this point.

But the numbers did provide a basis for some serious discussion about the merits of forming such a district.

"We know what our transportation problems are, and we know we need transit solutions," said Pitkin County Commissioner Dorothea Farris.

"The more options we keep open, the better off we are . . . I want to hear all the options," she said.

Possible formation of a trans-

portation district is just one of the myriad of discussions going on following the recent inter-governmental purchase of the former Aspen Branch of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad line.

Although a separate issue at this point from the workings of the Roaring Fork Railroad Holding Authority (RFRHA), the entity that now owns and oversees the 33-mile-long corridor, a transportation district could very well be part of the future equation.

The Roundtable, formed last year by Healthy Mountain Communities as part of the state grant-funded Regional Transportation Partnerships Project, is a loose-knit group of mostly elected officials from Aspen to Parachute.

Several months ago, the Roundtable decided it would be the group most likely to pursue the formation of a transportation district.

Especially now, since RFRHA has enough on its plate trying to figure out how to run a railroad and what to do with the newly acquired property, it makes sense that some other group take the lead in promoting a transportation district.

The big question before the group at a meeting at Carbondale Town Hall on Aug. 28 was whether there was enough political will to move the project forward.

After much discussion within the divergent group, the consensus was that, "yes," there is enough interest to move beyond exploring the idea and start working out the details.

"Forming a transportation district is like getting married," said Carbondale Trustee Jim Breasted. "You don't know going in how many children you want to have, where you want to live, or if you just want to live together."

Rifle City Councilman Bill

Grant said he'd like to see a region wide public opinion poll, and warned that there needs to be an open public process from the beginning.

The state law requires two formal public hearings by each participating government entity before an inter-governmental agreement can even be drawn up identifying the district boundaries and an election called, Healthy Mountain Communities Director Colin Laird said.

Central to most of the participants' thinking that a transportation district might be a good idea is a common understanding that a four-lane Hwy 82 from Glenwood Springs into Aspen is only a temporary fix to the Valley's transportation problem.

Several factors seem to support it:

- Average daily traffic at the Glenwood Interstate 70 exit has doubled in the last 10 years;

- This summer's Hwy 82 congestion related to the up valley portion of the four-lane project will continue for the next five years;

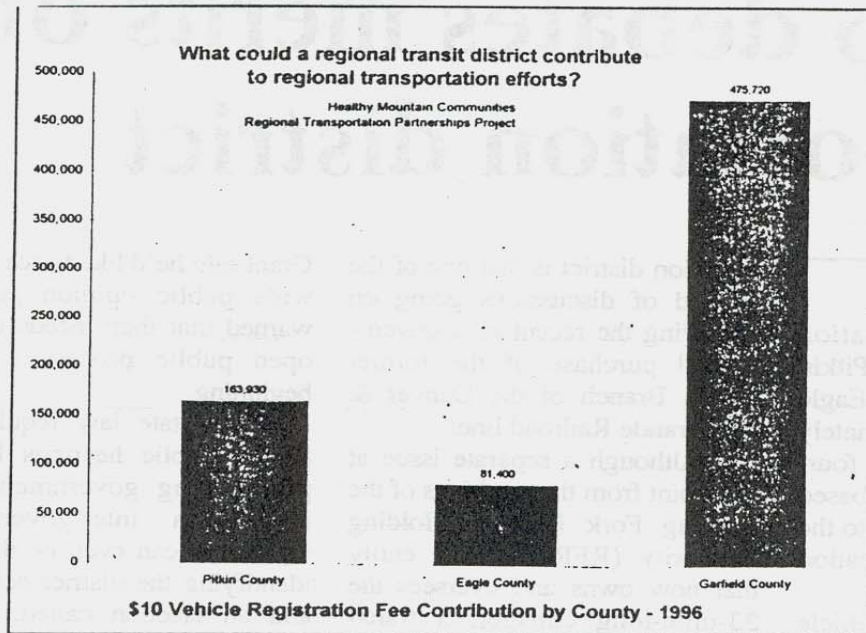
- Thousands of new homes are already approved for construction over the next decade between Aspen and Parachute, and most of the job base continues to be in Aspen/Pitkin County;

- A four-lane Hwy 82 is expected to reach capacity early in the next century; and,

- The Roaring Fork Transit Agency (RFTA), which runs the

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current bus system, does not have adequate funding to increase its capacity, although rider demand increases every year.

“We don’t have to wait until all these other things are done before we start working on the transportation district,” RFTA General Manager Dan Blankenship said. “We have to have all these pieces of information before us before we are able to make any decisions.”

Education and participation by the various communities throughout the identified “region” that’s being discussed is also critical to its success.

“People in Parachute and Rifle need to know that they do have a say,” said George Roussos, who works for Eagle County and

chairs the RFRHA board. “They also need to recognize that they are a part of this transportation solution.”

Roussos added that nothing should be pre-determined with regards to a transportation district. It may even be that it’s not the ultimate answer, he said.

Garfield County Commissioner John Martin predicted that the “core” of any future transportation district will be the area west of Glenwood Springs.

Martin said statistics show that 60 percent of the region’s population will live from Glenwood Springs west, but they’ll still mostly work jobs from Glenwood up to Aspen.