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Town Board votes to continue Environmental Assessment of Downtown Estes Loop

At its April 15 special meeting, the Estes Park Town Board voted to continue through the Environmental Assessment (EA) of the one-way couplet and “no action” alternatives for the Downtown Estes Loop project. Following a project overview presentation by staff, the board received public comments from 52 individuals in the audience of approximately 300 people. After considering public testimony, hundreds of written public comments, and data provided thus far by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, the board voted 4-2 to continue with the analysis of the project. The 5.5-hour video of the meeting presentation, public comment and board deliberation is expected to be available by April 20 via www.estes.org/videos.

Pursuant to this decision, the next step in the NEPA process is to initiate more detailed design of the one-way couplet and to evaluate the potential environmental impacts and mitigation measures for the “no action” alternative and the one-way couplet. Once this effort is complete, a draft EA document will be finalized and distributed for public comment. Specific dates for the EA release and comment period will be announced in the coming months. A final decision on whether or not to build the project will come only after a completed EA and recommendation. Project updates are available at www.downtownestesloop.com.

Background

In 2013, the Town initiated a public outreach process to gather input on several transportation options and to obtain the community’s priorities for improving transportation downtown. A one-way couplet option (conversion of traffic on Elkhorn, Moraine and Riverside from two-way to one-way) was the majority of the participating public’s preferred transportation solution to improving traffic flow, second to construction of a downtown parking structure. Thus, the Town Board proceeded with an application to Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) for a one-way couplet. Approximately \$13 million in FLAP funding was subsequently programmed. In addition, CDOT awarded the Town \$4.2 million in Responsible Acceleration of Maintenance and Partnerships (RAMP) funds to use as the matching funds for FLAP. The purpose of this project is to improve access to Rocky Mountain National Park by shortening travel times, reducing congestion, and improving safety through Downtown Estes Park.

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All projects that involve federal funding need to follow the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. In accordance with NEPA, Central Federal Lands Highway Division (CFLHD) initiated an EA which describes the need for the project, description of alternatives evaluated, and environmental impacts of the proposed action. An EA evaluates a number of environmental resources including land use, social impacts, economic impacts, air quality, noise, water quality, floodplains, biological (wetlands, wildlife, etc.), hazardous materials and historic resources, among others. The project team is currently evaluating alternatives as part of the NEPA process. Public input is an important part of the EA process and in selecting an alternative.

The Downtown Estes Loop project was initiated in September 2014 by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) CFLHD, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and Town of Estes Park. The project was selected for inclusion in the FLAP through a competitive application process. This program supplements State and local resources for public roads, transit systems, and other transportation facilities, with an emphasis on high-use recreation sites and economic generators that are located on, are adjacent to, or provide access to federal lands such as Rocky Mountain National Park.

Shortly after the project was initiated, public open houses were held on October 8, 2014 to introduce the project, gather input on transportation issues within the community, resources of concern in the project area and options evaluated as part of previous plans. This information was then utilized to help finalize the purpose and need statement for the project, and to develop and screen alternatives. Comment forms were distributed and a summary of the meetings was captured. Subsequently, small group meetings open to the public were held in December of 2014 to discuss topics of concern in greater detail. From November 2014 to the present, the project team has proceeded with data collection and screening of alternatives, many of which have been put forward by the public. A two tiered screening process was developed with input from members of the Technical Advisory Committee which includes team members from Central Federal Lands, the Town of Estes and CDOT. On March 25, 2015, a public meeting focused on the results of the NEPA screening analysis. Specific information and materials presented at public meetings is available on the project website at www.downtownestesloop.com.

To sign up for the project mailing list or submit a comment, please contact info@downtownestesloop.com or call the hotline at 970-480-7045. Subscribe to receive Town news and/or meeting agendas by visiting www.estes.org. More Town news is available at www.facebook.com/townofestesparkco and www.twitter.com/townofestespark.

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