

# The 29 Road project does not add up

Kari Sholtes

Letters to the Editor

Grand Junction Daily Sentinel

October 17, 2024

The Colorado Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) typically support transportation projects that solve traffic problems and improve safety. The proposed 29 Road and I-70 interchange project does neither. Worse still, it creates a few new problems.

The transportation study — completed by consultants hired jointly by the City of Grand Junction and Mesa County — makes two things clear: 1) this proposed interchange is forecasted to increase injuries and deaths, and 2) this project will increase congestion on Patterson Road. Because of these safety and congestion concerns, CDOT and FHWA do not support this project as proposed and will not help fund it. That means we may not be granted access to I-70 without expensive changes not included in the current project cost. Even if we are granted access, our community will likely have to foot the entire bill and maintenance burden, which is not normal for an interstate highway project.

As a professor of transportation engineering, I teach my students how to analyze projects large and small. Typically, a committee of experts work together to make sure that the transportation options and outcomes are properly analyzed. As engineers forecast future traffic numbers and how that traffic would impact safety and the delays of drivers, they are in communication with the expert committee to refine any analysis and discuss any outcomes.

All analyses compare future traffic conditions using the same future population and growth. In the most recent report, consultants found that the proposed 29 Road interchange and its interaction with the Horizon Drive interchange — a mere 1.2 miles away along the tightest interstate curve in the valley — results in a forecasted increase of 2.35 injuries, including fatalities, each year on I-70. This represents almost a 7% increase in crashes that injure people on this stretch of I-70. Yes, there will be many more miles traveled on this roadway segment, but that does not change the way CDOT and FHWA consider the increase in crashes. Through their Vision Zero initiatives, CDOT and FHWA are committed to decreasing fatalities on our roads and only support and design projects that do so.

CDOT is on that expert committee, has seen the safety outcomes and has requested a more safety-conscious design in order to grant access to building on- and off-ramps on I-70. Additionally, the combined fatalities and injuries on Patterson are projected to increase by 8 per year (from 2.7 per year to 10.6 per year). Therefore, this project is expected to increase total injuries, including fatalities, by over 10 per year. This significant increase requires a solution if the 29 Road interchange is to be constructed.

On the front page of The Daily Sentinel on Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2024, there are references to an “additional” safety analysis that is claimed to show a different outcome. However, this additional

analysis has not been shown to or reviewed by the committee of technical experts. This is not a normal process. Why has this additional safety study not followed the

same process of other analyses? The second outcome of the consultant's report — which was reviewed by experts — is that the project also causes congestion. Transportation engineers design projects to perform well in the future, during rush hour. We know that if we design for these high-traffic conditions, our roadways will be able to handle current traffic well. Unfortunately, the consultants found that the first year this project opens, the new traffic causes more congestion resulting in a 40%+ increase in delay traveling westbound on Patterson Road in both the morning and afternoon, during daily rush hour. In addition to the immediate and long-term westbound delays, there is no immediate benefit from the project to traveling eastbound on Patterson in the morning, and delays are forecasted to increase each year after project completion. Only afternoon rush hour traffic traveling eastbound on Patterson benefits from decreased travel time (24% decrease in traffic delay) immediately when the project is completed. Unfortunately, this one beneficial traffic pattern on Patterson is erased within 15 years — before the project debt is paid off by taxpayers — when traffic regresses to the same delay as experienced if we did not build and pay for this project.

While Patterson experiences increased delays immediately and in the future due to the project, there are some resulting decreases in travel time at intersections along the I-70 Business loop, but most of those gains do not improve future conditions above “gridlock” which is an “F” rating from transportation engineers.

With the proposed 29 Road interchange project, taxpayers will be paying millions of dollars every year for 30 years and, according to the city's and county's own study, all we get is a less safe system, more delays on Patterson, much more traffic on our most dangerous section of I-70 and no relief from gridlock on I-70B. Furthermore, the 29 Road Interchange ballot measure would not fully fund the additional safety design that may be required by CDOT. For \$173 million (including expected interest over 30 years) in costs to local taxpayers, there should be significant transportation benefits beyond the 50-year-old notion of “completing the loop,” but there is no evidence of such benefits at this point. This project simply does not add up.

*Kari Sholtes, PhD, PE, is a civil engineer and a member of the Colorado Mesa University faculty.*



KARI SHOLTES