

Connecting two cities

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Southwest Wyoming's oil and gas energy boom has brought lucrative jobs, massive government revenues and generally prosperous times to Sweetwater County.

The boom also has helped turn the 12-mile stretch of Interstate 80 between the county's two biggest cities, Rock Springs and Green River, into the state's busiest highway.

For several years now, state, county and city officials have been looking for ways to construct a new road between Rock Springs and Green River. Officials believe a new access road could help alleviate the growing interstate traffic congestion and better ensure the safety of people traveling between the two cities.

Now they have three possible routes to choose from.

Wyoming Department of Transportation engineers have begun a feasibility study that will explore the possibility of constructing a new access road between Rock Springs and Green River. To kick off the study, the department unveiled three possible routes developed in a preliminary conceptual design during an open house Thursday night.

Two of the three proposed routes would begin at Green River's east I-80 interchange and then follow the remnants of the old Lincoln Highway -- which used to run between the two cities -- north of I-80. A third route would start on the city's south side and run south of the interstate, hooking up with U.S. Highway 191.

"I don't care what route we go with, either the north side or the south side ... we just need some sort of alternative route," Green River City Councilman Tom McCullough said.

Although Green River and Rock Springs are only 14 miles apart in central Sweetwater County, I-80 is the only paved road between the two cities.

Officials worry that traffic along the interstate is getting more congested every day. Truck numbers are skyrocketing, and they've become a major hazard to Green River residents who commute to work or to shop and recreate in Rock Springs.

Traffic counts along I-80 between the two cities have exploded in recent years, according to WYDOT. A recent study showed the average daily traffic count between Rock Springs and Green River tops 16,000 vehicles per day. That figure is expected to nearly double to 31,500 by 2020, according to highway projections.

Green River officials also worry about maintaining access to the region's only hospital, Sweetwater Memorial Hospital in Rock Springs, during bad weather or when the interstate is closed due to accidents.

"What happens when somebody has a heart attack and that road is closed? That (closed road) could be the difference," McCullough said.

Green River officials said early, unofficial cost projections to build an approximately 12-mile-long road have been estimated at about \$2 million per mile, or around \$24 million total. Officials expect the project to take a decade or longer to complete.

Hemmed in

Green River officials said a new road could also help the city expand and develop new housing in a city that currently has little room for growth.

The city is hemmed in by I-80 and the scenic landmark Castle Rock to the north and steep, undevelopable topography to the south. In recent years, the city has looked to the east and west I-80 interchanges for possible land annexation in an effort to extend city limits.

Officials note the city has lost out on a lot of possible business opportunities in recent years because of a lack of available land for those businesses.

Last year, city officials indicated their desire to annex a 132-acre parcel of land located east of Green River. The land lies

east of the city cemetery and due north of Green River's east interchange on I-80.

Officials said acquiring the land could help meet the city's housing needs. Additionally, it could be used for a portion of the new proposed access road between Rock Springs and Green River.

Last December, Congress passed a bill, written by the late Sen. Craig Thomas, that would convey the 132 acres to the Bureau of Land Management, which in turn would sell the land to the city of Green River. Green River officials have allocated \$150,000 in the city budget to purchase the land.

Rock Springs council members have endorsed the idea and contributed to the study, said Councilman Neil Kourbelas. "I very much like the idea," Kourbelas said in an interview.

He said there's potential for economic development along the proposed secondary roadway. "If we have the existing infrastructure for new businesses to come in ... we could further enhance the city's business and industrial community, which is important for us," he said.

WYDOT Rock Springs District Engineer John Eddins said the feasibility study will develop the criteria that will be used to select a route. He said the study will examine the feasibility of construction, the costs of construction, potential for development along the new road, impacts to existing roads and impacts to the communities. A final report is due March 3.

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