

Will metro loop finally be reality?

We hope a plan goes forward that can close the beltway around Denver — 40 years after the idea was first proposed.

Jefferson County, Broomfield and Arvada are forming a public highway authority that might finally end the metro area's 40-year long Battle of the Beltway.

It's too early to tell if their plan to complete a tollway linking the Jefferson County airport with C-470 through Golden will prove financially feasible. But we applaud their efforts to bypass the endless political bickering that has so far stalled plans to complete the Beltway.

This fight originated in 1968, when the Federal Highway Act proposed an interstate highway through the southwest metro area. Environmentalists opposed the plan and it was derailed after Richard Lamm was elected governor in 1974 and vowed to drive a "silver stake" though the project, which was then called I-470. After years of squabbling, a scaled-down highway was built along the route, the current C-470.

The next step came in 1988 when voters in Douglas, Arapahoe and Adams counties approved plans for the E-470 toll road that now links the eastern half of the metro area from C-470 to Interstate 25. But in 1989, voters in Jefferson, Boulder and Adams counties crushed plans to complete the beltway with a tollway through the northwest quadrant.

A 10-mile stretch of that final "missing link" was later filled in by the Northwest Parkway from I-25 to U.S. 36, but there is still a vast 20-mile gap between the parkway's end and the intersection of C-470 and Interstate 70 at Golden.

That's the gap Arvada, Broomfield and Jefferson County hope to fill with an estimated \$813 million worth of new construction, including 10 miles of new tollway from 128th Avenue to 58th Avenue. Such a project would probably entice the Northwest Parkway to extend its lanes south to link up with the new tollway — leaving only a 7-mile gap remaining. The latest plan envisions filling in that gap by improving highways 93 and U.S. 6 through Golden as a free, four-lane parkway with speeds through town limited to 45 mph.

The plan is bitterly opposed by Golden, which has fought all previous plans to close the Beltway. But since Golden has little legal standing to stop construction outside its city limits, the biggest problem might be how to finance the estimated \$300-million cost of improvements on the final 7 miles of free highway linking with C-470.

Ideally, an investor such as Brisa Auto-Estradas, operators of the Northwest Parkway, would be willing to front the entire cost of the improvements in return for rights to operate the new toll road and feed its traffic into Brisa's existing Northwest Parkway. If such a scenario falls through, at worst we'd be back to the same drawing board we've scribbled on for 40 years.

Four decades of bickering is enough. We wish Broomfield, Arvada and Jeffco luck as they proceed with the detailed engineering and financial planning necessary to complete the beltway network.

Beltway buckle

Jefferson County, Arvada and Broomfield will form a public highway authority to explore ways of financing and building a 20-mile roadway link that would close the beltway around metro Denver. Their tentative plan calls for a 10-mile tolled portion sandwiched by parkway extensions at the north and south ends.

— Proposed beltway
— Proposed tollway

