

Solving state's mobility crisis

By The Denver Post

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A wise man once said: "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

We're not sure that \$4 a gallon gasoline is a "crisis," but it has certainly triggered a political firestorm. Now, Coloradans must ensure that public attention is converted into a comprehensive solution to our national, state and regional transportation problems.

Specifically, The Post urges a four-point plan:

- A revitalized federal transportation program buttressed by at least a 10 cent per gallon increase in current federal fuel taxes. The money should be sent directly by formula to the states, without special earmarking, to repair and upgrade our crumbling highway network. A share of the new money should be funneled into rapid transit systems such as FasTracks.

- An expanded state transportation program, as is now being crafted by Gov. Bill Ritter's "blue ribbon" transportation panel. Last year, the panel offered options ranging from \$500 million to \$2 billion a year, but Ritter and the legislature shied away from passing any revenue increase in an election year. If the politicians are similarly timid next year, transportation advocates should take the issue to the ballot by an initiative.

Any new state transportation money must include a share to hard-pressed city and county road and bridge budgets. Likewise, the current state funds allocated to transit, just \$24 million this year for the entire state, should be at least doubled.

- At the local level, it is time for the metro area to organize a regional transportation authority. Such a district can help augment state funds to deal with pressing regional issues and help build the highway feeder networks necessary to make the new FasTracks system work.

- There should be substantial private-sector participation in the regional plan, with a toll road helping complete the final link in the metropolitan area beltway from Broomfield to Golden, a potential HOT lane (free to buses and car pools but available to single drivers willing to pay a toll) to complete RTD's proposed bus rapid transit system up U.S. 36 to Boulder, and an expansion of RTD's existing public/private partnerships on its commuter rail lines to help defray the rising cost of FasTracks.

At the regional level, completion of FasTracks and maintaining and upgrading the roads we have must take the highest priority over any new highway construction. Soaring fuel prices have made FasTracks more vital than ever, but inflation in construction costs has raised its price from \$4.7 billion to \$6.1 billion.

Part of that gap can be bridged by a revitalized federal program. Federal financing paid for 80 percent of the region's original Southwest light-rail line but the federal share for FasTracks has dropped to about 50 percent. A boost in federal aid could help FasTracks succeed.

Likewise, if the legislature doubles state aid to transit, at least half the total should go to metro Denver. That would put \$24 million a year into FasTracks, with an equal sum aiding transit systems throughout the state.

Finally, a 0.1 percent sales tax already is collected throughout the RTD region and is earmarked for paying off the bonds for Invesco Field. That tax will expire Jan. 1, 2012. If voters would approve continuing that existing tax and dedicating it to FasTracks, it would add about \$40 million a year to the funding stream.

That's a total of \$64 million a year in new state and local funds — enough, in connection with RTD's public/private partnerships, to ensure FasTracks meets its vital goals.