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Vision of Utah Lake road takes step toward reality



Caleb Warnock - DAILY HERALD

The decades-old vision of a road across Utah Lake is taking steps toward reality.

And just as quickly, controversy has followed.

Rep. Ken Sumsion, R-American Fork, has introduced a bill to the Legislature seeking \$3 million "to study a raised highway that traverses Utah Lake." House Bill 115 is now in the hands of the House Transportation Committee.

In addition, Utah County's planning organization is printing maps of the county's future transportation plans which show a road across the lake. On the maps the road is listed as a "vision project."

And, saying the state is too slow and underfunded, at least two private investment groups are proposing to build toll roads in different locations across the lake.

Jim Westwater, president of the Utah Valley Sierra Forum, decried the proposal to spend \$3 million to study a road across the lake.

"It would be a far better expenditure of funds to invest in the cleanup and restoration of a healthy ecosystem for Utah Lake and its watershed," he said, noting he'd like to see a town hall meeting held on the issue. "This is not just a transportation issue. It will have major quality-of-life and quality-of-ecosystem implications for now and for well into the future."

One of the investment groups proposing to build a toll causeway, Utah Crossing, Inc., is passing out a 40-page brochure of their plans. Their road would include four traffic lanes, an emergency lane, and a pedestrian walkway. The toll will be about the cost of a gallon of gas and would save 30-40 miles of driving, according to the brochure.

"The proposed Utah Lake Causeway is to be a completely private venture, and be paid for through traffic toll," according to the brochure.

The causeway is an "economic necessity" and "much needed emergency travel access" according to the group. The brochure shows copies of letters of support from Sen. Mark Madsen, Sen. Margaret Dayton, Rep. Mike Morley, Sumsion, Rep. Brad Daw, County Commissioner Larry Ellertson, County Engineer Clyde Naylor, Dave Grierson, sovereign lands coordinator for the state, and Lehi Mayor Howard Johnson.

In addition, there are letters from Rocky Mountain Power and Questar stating they would like to negotiate for easements on the causeway. There is also a letter from Anderson Geneva Development Inc., a group which is building thousands of homes in Vineyard, saying they would like to extend Orem's 800 North through their property and would like to consider connecting that road to the causeway.

At one point, the brochure states that Mountainland Association of Governments, which is Utah County's transportation planning organization, has "accepted the concept as outlined and are

supportive of the project."

"That is not correct," said Darrell Cook, director of Mountainlands. "That is editorial license on the part of the author... We are adamantly opposed to a causeway. I have told them [Utah Crossing Inc.] that that is environmentally impossible on that lake because it interferes with the free flow of the water."

Leon Harward, president of Utah Crossing, Inc., downplayed the investment group and its goals.

"We are waiting to see what happens, so until something is definitive and something is decided, we are going to keep a low profile," he said. "We are just trying to make something happen. We don't know when it will happen or if it will."

Cook said that causeway construction within the lake could disturb huge amounts of phosphorus stored in the lake bottom, exacerbating algae blooms that already affect the lake in summer, potentially killing fish by creating a dead zone.

As Utah County's population grows, a bridge -- not a causeway -- across Utah Lake will likely become necessary, and Mountainlands has added that concept to its planning maps, Cook said.

Planners expect 1 million people to be living in Utah County by 2040, creating an enormous demand for east-west travel access, said Cook.

"There is just no way we are going to put them in Orem and Provo," Cook said. "We expect a significant portion of that growth to be on the west side of the lake... It makes sense that at least one [east-west road] should be crossing Utah Lake at the center."

A Utah Lake bridge is probably the "most attractive and logical" place for a toll road in Utah County, he said.

Mosida Orchards, a proposed planned community on the south-most edge of Utah Lake, is also proposing a lake causeway, likely to cross the lake's lower portion.

"The developers of Mosida Orchards propose building a causeway across Utah Lake funded through private investment and user fees," according to a statement on the developer's Web site, MosidaOrchards.com. "This will provide more commuter options to the west side and answer the question of where are all the people going to live. Finally a developer that pays its own way! And a portion of the fees can be used not only to fund the construction and maintenance of the project but as a catalyst for lake development and recreation."

Speaking recently in a town hall meeting in Saratoga Springs, Sumsion said a lake road is needed "because we are going to add a quarter-million people in the next 30 years. I am kind of putting it out there and proposing that it be built within 30 years -- but if we could pull it forward and it could be a toll road, that would give us as citizens a chance to realize it."

Any lake road would be complicated by environmental concerns, he said.

Speaking in the same meeting, Sen. Mark Madsen said the toll concept, as yet untested in Utah Valley, is especially inviting because no taxpayer money would be at risk should the project fail because of a lack of commuters willing to pay a toll.

"We will have a battle if we can't get the cooperation of the environmentalists," Sumsion said. "I've been getting a lot of e-mails saying 'You are going to ruin the lake.' "

Saratoga Springs Councilman Bud Poduska then interrupted.

"Can we use the environmentalists as piers for the causeway on the new road?" he said.

"Perhaps we can be considered guardians of that important lake, to keep it a healthy and a beautiful asset to this county," said Marsha McLean, vice-president of Utah Valley Sierra Forum, when asked by the Daily Herald to respond to Poduska's comment. "It requires environmentalists and the reason we are environmentalists is to protect those few things we have not decimated on the lake -- the flyway bird habitat, and the June suckers. The only way they are going to stay alive is because we are protectors of the lake."

Any road across the lake "is an ill-conceived plan," she said. "We already have a daunting task in front of us in its current condition. The health of the human populace is dependant upon the health of the lake."