

# Moab & Fracking & Climate Change & Elevated River Bikeways...

Jim Stiles

I don't live in Moab anymore. It's been a decade since I packed my bags and slipped south (and then east) to smaller, quieter communities. Last week, after 37 years, I closed out my box at the post office. Box 221 was my last physical connection to Moab. Handing Kyle my key, I felt downright emotional. A lot of mail has flowed through there, for better or worse, over the decades and many conversations took place standing in front of it. And I even remember back a couple decades when one of the old county commissioners suggested that for most of us hippie-types in Moab, a post office box was about as close as any of us would get to owning property in Grand County. As incredible as this might sound, I miss that guy and the way Moab felt in those days. And interestingly, after years of real affordable housing in Moab, times when us hippies did buy homes, now most younger, recently-arrived Moabites with modest incomes are once again forced out of the real estate market.

But there I go reminiscing again. Sentiment and nostalgia are frowned upon by many of my more "progressive" friends these days. That surprises me, because there was a time when we were the Romantics and the Dreamers. Still, while I've relinquished my last little piece of property in

Moab, my PO cubbyhole, my spiritual and emotional connection to Moab is still strong. And it always will be. So I keep an eye on the town and surroundings from a distance, knowing that it's not really mine anymore. What the new citizens of Moab want it to become may disturb me, but in the end, it's their community to do with as they please. I threw in the towel long ago; I don't think I've openly complained about the never-ending construction and development of Moab's suburbs in years. On my rare trips to Moab, I avoid Main Street, seeking out my old friends and neighbors.

But every once in a while, it's hard to at least keep from offering an opinion. Two familiar issues are making headlines again—massive recreation upgrades and massive energy extraction. What no one seems interested in admitting is the connection these two economic engines have to each other. So let me leap into the breach.

**But every once in a while, it's hard to at least keep from offering an opinion. Two familiar issues are making headlines again—massive recreation upgrades and massive energy extraction. What no one seems interested in admitting is the connection these two economic engines have to each other. So let me leap into the breach.**

Last month I was back in town and read in the Moab Sun News that a proposed multi-million dollar Moab Transit Hub and Elevated River Bikeway is about to start construction. I had heard very little about this plan, though I'd caught a snippet of information several years ago, in a Times-Independent article by Ron Georg. He made references to a planned "bike path" along the Colorado River from Route 128's junction with US 191, to Negro Bill Canyon, three miles upstream. It all sounded quite benign were it not for one disturbing sentence. Georg wrote, "The next phase of the state Route 128 bike path, which would take riders east, is the most complicated, as it will require a path to be cantilevered out over the Colorado River."

*Cantilevered?* What the hell, I thought. I stewed over the mere idea of it for a few minutes, but ultimately decided it belonged in the same category as other outlandish

Utah-grown fantasies like cold fusion, Book Cliffs Highways and toxic waste incinerators. Eventually I forgot about it. In the three years that have passed since, I never heard the project mentioned once until late July, when the announcement appeared in the local papers. It's a done deal and by the time this story goes online, construction will have already commenced.

In the *Moab Sun News*, Kristin Johnson Millis wrote, "The plan is not a simple one. The elevated concrete paths are built like bridges with girders and decks. Holes will need to be drilled for piers. A crane, which will take up both lanes of traffic, is needed to

place the girders and decks." To get those piers and girders and decks in place, traffic along 128 will be regularly disrupted. Millis reported, "Engineers have been working with Castle Valley residents to find solutions to a construction project that will affect daily commutes into town. Contractors are allowed to shut down to one lane between 5:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Traffic delays should be 15 minutes or less for commuters."

Promoters of the bikeway have insisted that its main purpose is 'safety.' Clashes between bicyclists and autos have been numer-

ous and intense over the years. But efforts to gather data on bike-related accidents that involved serious injury or death have been unsuccessful. So far, while the conflicts between bikes and cars have almost become the stuff of legend, it's been difficult to accept the notion that a multi-million dollar bikeway is a more reasonable solution than a strictly enforced 25 mph speed limit.

More telling is Councilman Chris Baird's recent presentation to Governor Herbert. In a Moab Times-Independent story, Baird said, "For a long time we were the mecca for mountain biking, but about five years ago, we started seeing newspaper and magazine articles about Moab going stale...So we initiated a process with our last (resource management plan) with the [Bureau of Land Management] to create 150 miles of new single-track... By the time everything comes to fruit, we'll have an asset almost entirely

grant funded worth almost \$21 million."

Clearly, the Grand Plan of the Moab Transit Hub and Elevated Bikeway is to jump-start a perceived sagging tourist economy. It's been like this since Moab chose to put all its chips into an amenities/tourist economy two decades ago. Safety is a selling point but not the driving force behind it.

With a multi-million dollar budget and year-long delays, clearly this is one of the biggest recreation infrastructure projects ever initiated in Grand County (not counting road expansions). But who knew? There was some vague knowledge among the Moabites I spoke to of a "bike path." But elevated bikeway? Piers? Girders? CANTILEVERS? The mention drew blank stares. Finally, I sent a message via facebook to County Councilman Baird.

Baird advised me that, "There are several sections where the path will be an elevated bridge, although the pylons will only be in water during a very high water year. So, yes, the elevated sections are between the road and the river. Other parts of the path will be more of an elevated retaining wall, and, others, where there is land, will just be next to the road...I acted as manager on this project for about 1.5 years and haven't received any environmental complaints. The project has now passed all hurdles (except for construction) and so is now in the hands of the community development department. Castle Valley is concerned about the imposition on traffic while under construction, and some conservatives have offered criticism regarding the \$ spent, which is almost entirely federal grants."

I asked about BLM and whether environmental assessments to consider the impacts from the construction had been completed. Baird told me, "Yes, many EAs, in fact, as it was federal money the environmental scrutiny was even more strict than usual. The trail goes across state, federal, private, sovereign, and county land. In fact, a great deal of time and energy was put into routing the trail around one cottonwood tree."

With all the work that had been put into the project, it still baffled me why so few Moabites seemed tuned into it. I suggested that apathy might account for a lack of interest in or awareness of the project: "Even 20 years ago we used to joke about Moab Apathy but it seems to have outdone itself." Mr. Baird took issue with that comment and offered an expanded view of non-motorized versus motorized recreation:



"The Moabites you know must not read the newspaper," he said, "not, at least for the last 4 years. Apathy? Takes a lot of work to do these things, but, I assume you're talking about the apathy of the nay-sayers. The nay-sayers are those who think riding a bike instead of driving everywhere is a mighty trivial thing to spend money on, especially if it takes money away from roads for cars....I suppose, for one reason or another - probably that you aren't from the west and have always wanted to earn your red-neck merit badge - that you don't ride bicycles around, perhaps your version of enjoyment is to fly to the other side of the earth's hemisphere,

and drive around there for a while, before then flying back and driving around here for a while, ok... and taking a short hike here and there. Is an alternative transportation system developed specifically for non-motorized users so bad? I'm sure your preference is that everyone just go away, but, barring that, would you prefer that they burned gasoline, or powerbars?"\*

I contacted Katie Stevens at the Moab BLM. I was interested in following up on Councilman Baird's assertion that "many EA's" had been conducted in preparation for the project. Ms. Stevens replied by email, "Two EAs were done on this project - one was completed in 1999 and the other in 2004. There were no public comments on either EA."

The 2004 EA describes the proposed bikeway in some detail:

...the bike lane would be slightly separated from the highway both vertically and horizontally for approximately 36% of project length. In these narrow sections, special construction methods would involve highway guardrail and concrete curbing and riverside handrails and be supported by gabion and key block retaining wall or similar structures.



An architect's concept drawing of a small portion of the bikeway (courtesy Horrocks Engineering)

For approximately 12% of project length, the bike lane would be separated from the highway by more than 5 horizontal feet and require no vertical separation, guardrail, or other special construction.

The shared use bike lane would be built in stages. The entire project would require approximately 5,300 feet of gabion retaining wall (or similar structure), 6,300 feet of guardrail, 5,700 feet of handrail, 5,800 feet of concrete curbing, 300 feet of key block retaining wall (or similar structure), and construction of 80 foot long and 65 long bridges across drainages existing at the mouths of Negro Bill Canyon and Ice Box (Short) Canyon.

The BLM advertised the public comment period and even extended it in May 2004, but they received no comments. Whether it was Moab Apathy or the idea that such a huge project would never get funded is anybody's guess. As Baird noted, he "didn't receive environmental complaints" from environmental organizations. And finally, for the many Moab/Grand County citizens who don't ride bicycles, the project didn't appear to be something that they'd be personally interested in.

So while the idea of a "bike path" was never an issue for most residents, eight years after the public comment period came and went, some will be surprised to see what's coming. Whether you're a bike rider or not, the changes along those first three miles of river, upstream from US 191, will be significant.

Now, as construction is about to begin, a more accurate description of the proposal is available. According to Baird, "If the main project and 2 added alternatives are built the total elevated section of the trail will be 2,322' or .44 of a mile...The total trail, if phase 3 is constructed (currently an added alternative in the bid), will be about 2 3/4 mile long, including the Goose Island part which is already built. There will however, still remain



THE MOAB TRANSIT HUB

**Kim Schappert, of Moab Trails Alliance and the driving force behind the project said in 2010, "It's all going to be a showpiece." Whether a "showpiece" is what most Moabites wanted for the river road is unclear.**

about a .5 mile gap just before Negro Bill. Also, if the added alternatives are feasible, we plan an 88' bridge over the outlet of Negro Bill."

Also, according to Councilman Baird, "there will be 2217 additional feet of retaining wall." The total length of the elevated bikeway and retaining wall---4539 feet. Baird previously stated that, "Only a fraction of the pathway will be elevated." And that's true, if somewhat misleading. About a third of the 2 3/4 miles will be elevated. The entire

NEXT PAGE

