Background Information

The I-70 Viaduct, built in 1964, which is situated between I-25 and Colorado Boulevard, is considered functionally obsolete. Studies have been conducted to replace the viaduct for the last ten years. Although currently it remains structurally safe, the viaduct needs to be replaced or removed.

When discussion about the I-70 viaduct initially began there was no consensus on how it should be replaced. In 2008 there was agreement to review the options and arrive at a plan for replacing the viaduct, but there was no consensus as to how that should be done. Don Hunt, the Director of the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), renewed efforts to study options and recommend a plan of action.

Part of CDOT’s work includes a major outreach effort which has led to their “preferred alternative” in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement or EIS. This proposes to widen the highway in the Globeville, Swansea, Elyria neighborhoods, from the present three lanes to five lanes in each direction. Recognizing that the widening of the highway would inflict serious harm on these neighborhoods, CDOT proposes building the expanded highway below grade, on average 30 feet below ground level, and placing a cover over 10% of the project in the Swansea neighborhood within 50 feet of Swansea Elementary School. This is a “mitigation” effort.

A community lead group opposing this CDOT “preferred alternative” has emerged, taking the position that the viaduct should be demolished and I-70 thru traffic be re-routed to I-270 and I-76. A new East 46th Avenue would be built at surface level to handle local traffic.

A variety of questions have been raised with respect to both of these proposals, many of which have not yet been adequately addressed. An initial Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was submitted to the EPA in 2008 that didn’t include the reroute option. A Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) is being prepared for submission in 2014, supporting the “preferred alternative.” Public involvement in the preparation of the SEIS will provide an opportunity to address questions and concerns.

To gain more transparency and a thorough review by CDOT, the reroute option has been requested to be included in the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement by various organizations including the Denver Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the United Community Action Network (UCAN). This approach would permit the equal and fair treatment of this community led option in the CDOT process.
Cost Estimates

CDOT has estimated the cost of the northern re-route to be significantly higher than the estimated cost of the preferred option. Cynthia Thorstad, a member of the City Government Committee has raised important questions about these estimates. The distribution of costs between the federal, state and local levels of government has not been provided by CDOT for either option. Also, many incremental costs do not appear to have been considered. In view of the League’s position on the rights of citizens to know, it would seem that these omissions and possible errors should be addressed.

Economic Development Issues

The impact of the enlarged highway on existing homes and businesses has been estimated by CDOT; at least 57 homes and 19 businesses will need to be demolished with compensation given according to law. These figures may not include partially destroyed businesses and homes (resulting, for example, from having to block access to them). These and other costs should be weighed against estimates of economic benefits in the near future as well as in the hoped for more distant future.

Water Problems

The proposed trench will be located in a low-level area of Denver. As our recent flooding reminds us, these lower basin areas can fill with water very quickly. Anticipating further climate change and the likelihood of more weather events than has been the case historically suggests that a below-grade option may not be a wise choice.

There is also concern about the run-off water from the highway which is to be channeled into the South Platte with the likely result that dirt and oil will enter the water on a regular basis, negatively affecting its proposed role as a natural area for recreation and for studies of Colorado’s ecology. Underground water in that area is contaminated by a smelting plant and may require CDOT to gain a permit to release higher levels than normal of contaminated water.

Air Quality

The demolition of the existing viaduct will release dust, particulates and other contaminants into surrounding areas. Information is not available on how the air quality will be affected and mitigated. CDOT’s plan includes a ventilation system for the Swansea school and a relocation of the playground, but neither of these measures may be adequate to offset the poorer quality of air as the viaduct is demolished. It has been estimated that the demolition may take 3-5 years.

Concerns also exist about long-term air quality above and immediately around the covered and uncovered parts of the highway. Pollution can be expected to increase with the increase in the number of lanes and, consequently, of traffic. There will also be more directed pollution because the highway will be enclosed on three sides. Further consideration should be given to the alternative re-route option as it would help to lessen the amount of congestion and air pollution in affected neighborhoods.