

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The Estes Valley is the eastern gateway to RMNP (see Figure 1) and is one of the most beautiful areas in the United States. It is also one of the most heavily visited areas in Colorado during the summer tourist season. RMNP is visited by over 3.3 million people each year, with nearly three-fourths of these visitors coming between June and September. During that same time period, the Town of Estes Park expands from its year-round population of 5,400 people to an overnight population of more than 25,000. All of this results in pressures on the local transportation system, as evidenced by congestion on the streets in the Estes Valley and by overflowing parking areas. This condition has negative impacts on the quality of life for Estes Valley residents and on the quality of experience for visitors. Since most visitors visit both RMNP and Estes Park, RMNP also experiences congestion, primarily focused on inadequate parking in the Glacier Gorge and Bear Lake areas. This led the National Park Service to institute a shuttle bus system between Glacier Gorge Campground and Bear Lake in the 1980's.

A wide range of concerns and thoughts about the Estes Valley's existing transportation system and how mobility might be improved were raised during public meetings and project advisory committee meetings. These ideas provided positive guidance during the study efforts and included the following:

- ◆ Because Estes Park is a gateway to RMNP, the primary economy for the community has historically been tourism and recreation. Not only does this dependency result in a large seasonal influx of visitors, but it also creates a large number of seasonal residents (including business owners and operators).
- ◆ Tourism in the Estes Valley is highly oriented to the summer season (with a peak in July and August), although there has been success in increasing visitation during the "shoulder" seasons (June, September, and October). In the past, Hidden Valley ski area operated in RMNP, although it hasn't operated for more than 10 years. Currently, off-season recreational opportunities in RMNP are primarily focused on snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and special events.
- ◆ Tourism and the outdoor activities typical of the Estes Valley mean that residents and visitors demand a high standard for the protection of environmental resources, and proposed transportation system improvements should be developed within this context.
- ◆ While tourism is still primary, other elements of the community's economy have emerged in recent decades. Estes Valley is home to an increasing number of year-round residents, including many retirees. Increased statewide mobility has allowed more residents to live in the Estes Valley and commute to jobs along the Front Range.

There is deep concern in the business community that summer congestion is reducing visitation by Front Range residents. This congestion is particularly noticeable on downtown streets and in parking lots. Backups can be particularly troublesome on summer weekends, when afternoon thunderstorms curtail outdoor activities and visitors leave RMNP en masse.

Highways are the primary element of the transportation system, and the predominant users and in private automobiles and recreational vehicles. Currently, there is limited transit service within the Estes Valley. A Call-and-Ride bus service is provided year-round for Estes Valley residents four days a week. RMNP operates a shuttle bus service in the Bear Lake area during the summer. Several private limousine services provide access to Front Range communities and Denver International Airport.

Parking is a key element of the transportation system, both for downtown Estes Park and RMNP. Downtown parking lots are often full during weekend and holiday afternoons. RMNP originally initiated the shuttle bus service as a response to limited parking at Bear Lake.

Broad support was expressed throughout the study by the public for alternatives to the private automobile that would provide accessibility within the community, to RMNP, and to Front Range cities and that would be convenient for both residents and visitors.

In response to the current levels of congestion and identified needs in both Estes Park and RMNP, the Town of Estes Park, RMNP, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), and Larimer County jointly identified the need for a comprehensive transportation plan for the Estes Valley. This was included in the Upper Front Range Transportation Plan as a high priority project. CDOT was successful in receiving a grant from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) through the Transportation and Community and System Preservation (TCSP) Pilot Program to fund much of the Estes Valley Transportation Alternatives Study.

B. Project Goals and Objectives

As the Estes Valley continues to grow and develop, planning for improvement and expansion of the Estes Valley transportation system is essential. This will ensure that the level of mobility available in the community improves in the future. Improvements to mitigate existing and potential future transportation problems should be identified so that financial planning may begin. The following goals and objectives guided the development of the plan for the future transportation system.

Project Goal

Develop a well-balanced, multi-modal transportation system that addresses existing deficiencies and accommodates future travel needs for the entire Estes Valley (the Town of Estes Park, RMNP, and surrounding lands in Larimer County) in a safe and efficient manner.

Project Objectives

Provide a wider range of transportation choices:

- ◆ Expand the transportation options for residents and visitors who cannot drive or who have limited access to alternative modes of transportation.
- ◆ Create an integrated transit system serving the entire Estes Valley and linking Estes Park and RMNP.
- ◆ Develop a unified system of pedestrian and bicycle links throughout the Estes Valley that integrates with modal interface points.
- ◆ Improve mobility and safety for visitors and residents.
- ◆ Increase the efficiency and availability of the existing transportation system.
- ◆ Increase system capacity in response to existing conditions and future growth.
- ◆ Improve the safety of the roadway system by addressing existing high accident locations and providing facilities for pedestrians and bicycles.

Improve the environment and reduce congestion:

- ◆ Preserve and enhance the scenery and recreational opportunities afforded to visitors in a beautiful mountain environment.
- ◆ Reduce environmental impacts by providing alternative modes of transportation that are convenient for visitors and residents.
- ◆ Reduce congestion on roads so they can accommodate all appropriate modes of transportation.

Improve visitor experience:

- ◆ Continue to improve aesthetics of the transportation system and individual projects.
- ◆ Provide clear guidance to the multitude of destinations in the Estes Valley.
- ◆ Accommodate seasonal parking demands.
- ◆ Manage the current supply of public parking spaces efficiently and increase the supply of public parking in locations that respond to commercial growth and the transit system.

C. Study Process

The process for conducting this study is schematically illustrated by Figure 2. As shown, the planning effort was comprised of eight work tasks. The tasks can be grouped into four general phases.

The first phase (tasks one through three) involved data collection and inventory of the existing transportation system, land uses, environmental, and socio-economic conditions. This was followed by the development of a travel demand model and forecasts. Working closely with the advisory committees, a statement of the current situation and goals and objectives for the plan were developed.

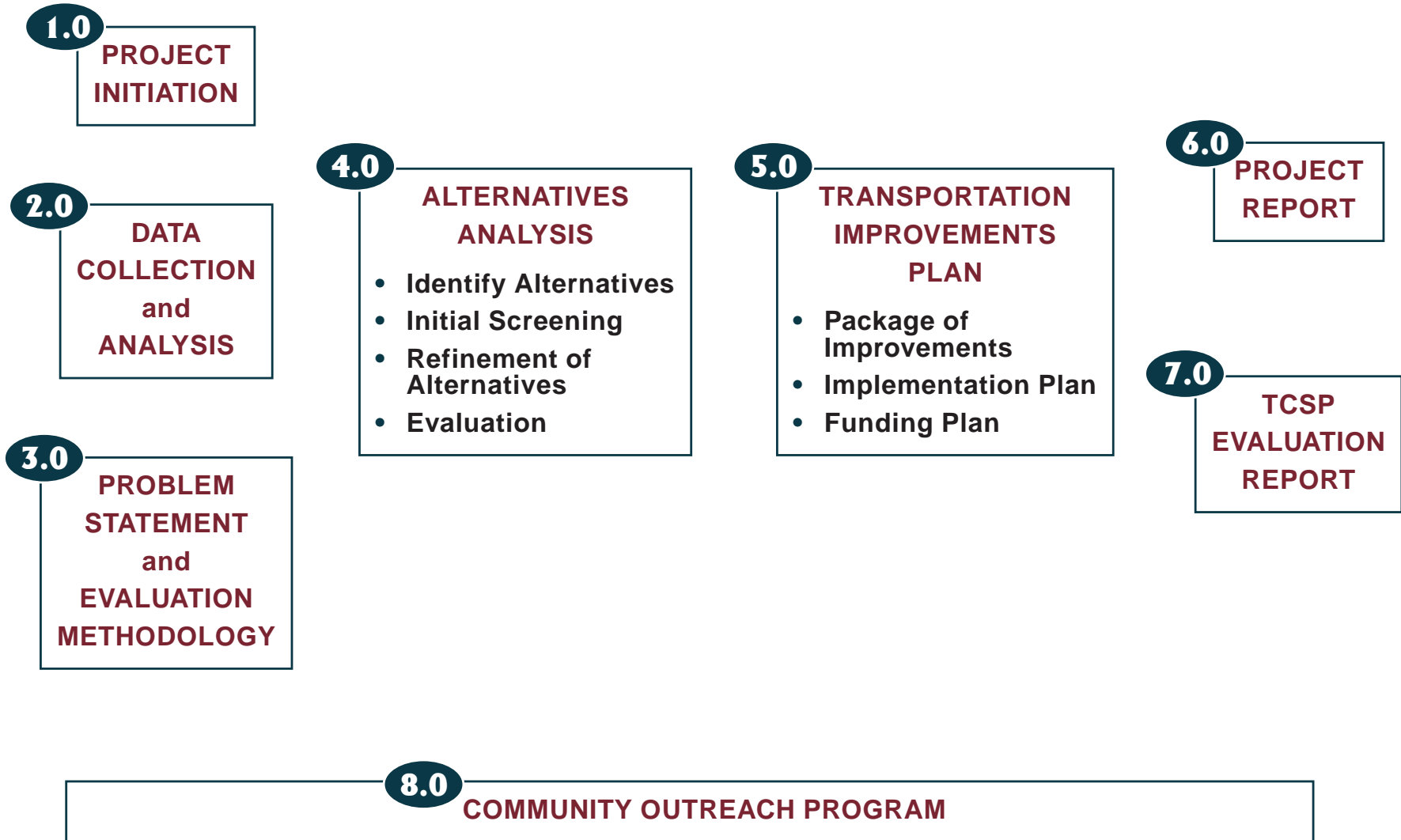
In the second phase, transportation improvement alternatives were developed and analyzed based on how well they addressed existing and future transportation issues. The various alternatives for each mode were grouped by priority so that a Near-Term Transportation Plan included the highest priority projects. The Vision Transportation Plan includes all of the improvements needed over the next 20 years if the transportation system is to handle expected demands.

Following finalization of the improvement plans, the final report will be written as well as the Transportation Community Systems Program (TCSP) evaluation report.

Throughout the study, there was close coordination with the Estes Valley community and its residents. This fourth phase of the study (public outreach) is described in detail in the following section.

Figure 2

Work Program



Public Outreach

Public involvement was a key element throughout the entire study. The primary public involvement goals of the Estes Valley Transportation Alternatives Study were to create public awareness of the many aspects of the study and to gather meaningful public input regarding issues identification and potential improvement projects. To achieve these goals, an extensive public outreach program incorporated several mechanisms into the process.

Policy and Oversight Committee

The Policy and Oversight Committee (POC) included eleven members representing elected officials from the Town of Estes Park and Larimer County; agency management; and members of public and private commissions, authorities, and civil, community, and merchant's community merchant's associations. The committee was comprised of the following representation:

- Town of Estes Park Board of Trustees
- Larimer County Board of County Commissioners
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Rocky Mountain National Park
- Estes Valley Planning Commission
- Estes Park Urban Renewal Authority
- Chamber Resort Association
- Business Advocates
- Community Services Coalition

The roles of the POC were to provide a community vision for the study; to assess political, financial, and institutional feasibility of the plan; to review the information developed by the Technical Advisory Committee; and to provide input to the study from a broad community perspective. The POC met eight times during the course of the study.

Technical Advisory Committee

The second group that greatly assisted the conduct of the study was the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). This committee was comprised of full-time staff from the member organizations and four citizens. The specific organizations included:

- Town of Estes Park
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Larimer County
- Rocky Mountain National Park
- Federal Highway Administration

The roles of the TAC were to help develop the problem statement and goals for the transportation plan, to provide sources for local data and information, to help in providing community contacts, and provide technical input and review and assessment of alternatives. There were 11 members of the TAC, and the committee met nine times during the course of the study.

Public Open Houses

The primary means of gathering input from the public were four open house public meetings that were held during the study. The first open house occurred in May 2001 at the Conference Center in Estes Park. The primary focus of this meeting was on the study purpose and process, the inventory of the existing transportation system, and the identification of issues and concerns. There were approximately 30 attendees and their comments focused on existing traffic, roadway, and RMNP problems; the need for transit services; and the desire for more pedestrian and bicycle paths.

In September 2001, the second open house was held at the Estes Park Municipal Building. This meeting focused on the results of inventories and surveys conducted over the summer, as well as the initial identification of alternatives. Approximately 35 people attended the meeting. They provided comments on all elements of the transportation system and were interested in the development of the evaluation process for alternatives.

The third open house occurred in March 2002 at the Estes Park Municipal Building. This meeting focused on the evaluation results for the various modal alternatives and which alternatives were retained and which were eliminated from further consideration. Approximately 30 people participated in the meeting and comments focused on the information presented about each alternative.

The fourth and final open house was held in June 2002, again at the Estes Park Municipal Building. This meeting was the culmination of the study efforts for the transportation plan. The recommendations of the study were presented with a Near-Term Transportation Plan, Vision Transportation Plan, and several fiscally constrained scenarios for implementation. Approximately 25 people attended the meeting, and the comments were favorable to the recommendations.

Public Surveys

To supplement the information obtained from the committees and the public at the open houses, three surveys were conducted during the summer of 2001. The surveys included interviews of visitors in the downtown area, a written survey of residents distributed with utility bills and a survey of motel guests. More information about these surveys and the results that were obtained is provided in the next chapter.