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Black Hawk mining business pans Colo. 119 projects

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Jesse Peterson, owner of Vic's Gold Panning near Black Hawk, pans for gold on North Clear Creek. He stands to lose property in plans to widen Colorado 119, part of highway-improvement proposals. (Craig F. Walker)

CLEAR CREEK CANYON — The family of five bighorn sheep arrives at the cliff above the "Welcome to Gilpin County" sign, right on cue.

A ram assumes his position on the highest rock just as gambling traffic starts backing up in the canyon, and just as state highway officials explain how a \$3.9 million sheep bridge would allow the confused animals to cross Colorado 119 safely.

But that's not all, state officials say. The wildlife bridge is only part of a proposed \$80 million project that would also widen 1.4 dangerous and clogged miles of 119 just below Black Hawk's booming casinos.

But that's not all. It would pay to clean up decades of leaking mine tailings and put fish back in a long-dead portion of Clear



A sign stands on Colorado 119 near Black Hawk, where officials want to widen the highway, rebuild sections of North Clear Creek, clean up mining tailings and install a wildlife bridge. (Craig F. Walker)
Creek.

But that's not all. Cellphone companies would pay for new state call boxes and traffic cameras up the canyon, in exchange for right of way to install cell relays in a notorious dropped-call dead zone.

Critics of the Black Hawk project also say, "That's not all." Buying up the right of way for widening may involve eminent domain and kicking out a gold-panning business that maintains some of the area's fast-dwindling heritage.

"I really don't want to leave," said Jesse Peterson, owner of 52-year-old Vic's Gold Panning, 2 miles south of Black Hawk. "Who knows if they'll give me anything for it?"

Project backers say the holdouts are few, and their concept — which awaits a federal stimulus blessing — binds the wishes of more than a dozen institutions.

"You'd never believe you'd get that many government agencies in a room agreeing at one time," said Russel Cox, the area's resident engineer for the Colorado Department of Transportation. "Combining all these things has been a lot of fun. I'm astounded there hasn't been a fight."

Projects dependent on funds

Consensus among the agencies requires a web of compromises. Most of the money goes to widen a highway from two lanes to four in a majestic canyon. But fishermen would see

the restoration of long-dead North Clear Creek water, and rocks dislodged for the roadway would help create new trout pools.

Wildlife fans might not favor wider roads for more cars near Black Hawk, but the bighorn-sheep bridge would lessen roadkill and ease the animals' contact with the Georgetown herd. Road builders would also be adding a bike path along the creek in the northern part of the canyon.

To build their mine-tailings treatment plant along the creek, the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state health department would have to haul rock up the canyon for a platform. Instead, CDOT will build the platform from rock moved in the road widening.

Though giddy with the problem-solving prospects, state officials warn that they are in competition with equally hopeful agencies around the nation. CDOT applied for \$62.5 million in stimulus money from the so-called TIGER grants — Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery. Yet there are 1,400 applicants proposing \$58 billion in work from a pot of only \$1.5 billion.

"We're not holding our breath for all of that," Cox said.

If the whole grant doesn't come through, he still intends to begin more limited work in 2010 using money already set aside by CDOT, the EPA, casinos and other entities.

History, messes of mining

The state says it will make fair right-of-way offers

Improving Colorado 119

State officials would like to widen the highway, create a wildlife bridge and clean up North Clear Creek, but the plan would likely drive out a gold-panning business.



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to landowners such as Vic's Gold Panning, based on independent appraisals. Peterson is awaiting an offer, meanwhile scoffing at Black Hawk leaders' dreams to widen the road and clean up the canyon to create what he calls a "destination resort."

Instead of preserving historic town buildings and character as originally planned, the gambling laws now promote creation of thoroughly modern high-rises like the new 33-story Ameristar hotel, Peterson said.

"They just celebrated the 150th anniversary of finding gold, and now you want to take away all the gold-panning," Peterson said.

State officials, though, welcome the chance to solve century-old problems from those original mining claims. A culvert just north of the Bullwhackers Casino in Black Hawk spills a continuous stream of zinc, cadmium and other heavy metals through town, runoff from the Gregory Incline Superfund area. Below the tube, North Clear Creek is sterile for miles.

"Someday, the creek could support brown trout again," said Warren Smith of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "It's a rare opportunity to take care of these things all at once."

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