

## 3 cheers for CDOT

### One place not to cut is highway maintenance

To begin the New Year, let's hear it for a government department that's doing something right. Put your hands together for ... the Colorado Department of Transportation!

Yes, that's right. Despite the frequent closures of I-70, US 40 and 285, and other roads from time to time, CDOT is, by comparison to its counterparts elsewhere, doing a yeoman's job in service to us all. To see how true this is, one has

#### AND ON YOUR RIGHT



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only to visit another state or two.

They say travel enhances one's perspective, and that's a fact. For your humble narrator, the moment of enhancement occurred while driving east from Des Moines across Iowa following a snowstorm. To those who live in Summit County, the amount of snow didn't seem like much: 4-5 inches. More snow than that fell on my parking pad two weeks ago. And a 25 mph wind; it's Iowa after all. But these were girly conditions, for those used to driving in Colorado winters.

The reality was quite different: I-80, one of this country's main east-west commercial highways, was reduced to a one-lane morass of ice, blowing snow and frozen slush, scored with deep ruts from innumerable passing semis. Traffic crawled. Passing was possible — 45 miles per hour was a blazing fast speed

— but dicey, since the one, or possibly, two, passing lanes were completely covered with several inches of snow, obscuring lane markers, road verges, dead gophers and God-knew-what-else.

In 150 miles, we saw three snowplows, only one of which was on our side of the freeway. There was no traction sand, ice slicer or mag chloride — none of the nice traction aids we know and love so well. But there were plenty of folks with more courage than brains — and the Audi Allroads and Ford Explorers to go with it. Every couple of miles there was a spin-off; in between were plenty of car divots. About 10 a.m., the Iowa Department of Transportation announced that if you went into the ditch, you were going to be on your own for awhile; they hadn't the resources to do any more towing.

Evidently, the state of Iowa has found a place to cut its budget. For all who visit during the winter: Drive at your own risk.

In Michigan, the process is different: It's not a matter of conscious choice; the state is broke. It's losing population faster than a colander leaks water. Their budget deficit for next year is almost twice Colorado's, and due to very powerful public employee unions, they don't have much flexibility in dealing with it. But the result is mostly the same as Iowa's: The roads are not exactly in ideal condition.

In the state capital, the general rule is: If it doesn't snow more than 4 inches at once, the roads don't get plowed. Basically, one waits for rain to melt the whole mess. And when it does, one is faced with holes, cracks and repairs made with what looks like a combination of congealed molasses and Pay Day bars. Pretty unimpressive for the state that was home to the first mass-produced automobile.

Both of these are cautionary examples



DAILY FILE PHOTO

**Coloradans are used to the ubiquitous orange CDOT plow trucks after a snowstorm, but others states aren't so lucky.**

as Colorado grapples with its own budget shortfalls in the years to come. In sum, don't touch the highway budget. It is one of the areas of a government's budget in which the equation is simplest: Public contributions are spread widely across the population via a number of different taxes — and the benefits are enjoyed by a large majority of residents and visitors alike. This is fundamentally different from the use of public monies for individual benefit — think Medicaid, unemployment insurance or even educational subsidies — from which I, as a teacher, profit as well.

The economic benefits of construction of roads and bridges is one of the reasons the Founding Fathers considered that activity a basic function of government: Infrastructure development and its concomitant aid to commerce, not unemployment insurance and Medicaid, is what they meant by "promote

the general welfare."

We should heed their ideas today. Good transportation infrastructure is as essential to a thriving economy today as it ever was, and it is worth public money to maintain what we have in good order. As we move into an era in which we have to make difficult decisions about where public monies will be directed in a time of shortage, let us ask our political class to justify each expenditure they propose by giving an accounting of how the state of Colorado — not individuals or favored classes of citizens — will profit from their decisions over the long run. Focus and priorities are the name of the game now.

Lest we find ourselves driving in Iowa.

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