

Making passenger rail from Pueblo to Fort Collins a reality - Part 1

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Karen Sherlock | Sep 04, 2024

The 8th Sustainable Transportation Summit met on Aug. 27 to address the question of how to finally make a rail system from Pueblo to Fort Fort Collin a reality. The Summit was hosted and delivered by [Commuting Solutions](#).

During the course of speaker presentations and round table discussion, in addition to a statewide rail system, it was suggested that a real regional transportation solution must include travel from Raton, New Mexico through Colorado to Cheyenne, Wyoming.

A rail system connecting all of Colorado is not a new idea. Indeed, Mayor Nancy McNally of the city of Westminster stressed several times that voters have been expecting an imminent solution as far back as 2004.

House Assistant Minority Leader Representative Joe Neguse reminded the audience that the United States lags behind the rest of the world in the delivery of an integrated rail system. The Infrastructure Law that was recently passed through a bi-partisan effort by the U.S.

Congress provides funds for passenger rail but much needs to be done before the system can come to fruition. Rep. Neguse suggested that in order to achieve the results needed, the funding for the Infrastructure Law must be protected with continued bi-partisan support in 2026.

Mayor Joan Peck of Longmont said that there is now a shared vision of transit. As transportation needs evolve, she said we need a transit system that serves all residents equitably and efficiently. She said a rail system between Longmont and Pueblo is needed now which incorporates a connection between Longmont and Denver's Union Station. Cooperation between agencies such as RTD (Regional Transit District) and CDOT (Colorado Department of Transportation), among others, is critical.

A transportation delivery plan from RTD and CDOT is expected by January 2025. Cost sharing will be key because delivery will be expensive. But the City of Longmont is already working alongside the rail solution with delivery of a micro transit plan which will provide parking garages and a tie between public transit and car ownership. A plan to meet the needs of all residents will include not just passenger rail but bus and micro transit options as well.

Partnerships between transit agencies, freight rail infrastructure owners, passenger rail, business and the public are needed to meet travel needs and provide sustainable solutions. The only absentees from the list of stakeholders at the Summit were the freight rail infrastructure owners.

Burlington Northern and Santa Fe own the rails north of Denver. Union Pacific owns the rails in southern Colorado. There is a corridor at South Denver which is shared by both. The participation of these companies is pivotal as they are the only ones who can provide the expense estimates for needed repairs and uplift to support a passenger rail system. While Summit attendees were assured that the freight companies are engaged, their absence was particularly notable since no plan or feasibility study can be completed without their input and expertise.

Governor Jared Polis said that Senate Bills 184 and 230 were successfully passed to produce two sources of funding for the passenger rail system. Senate Bill 184 imposes a fee on rental cars so that out-of-state visitors who contribute to wear and tear and congestion on Colorado's roads help pay for transportation. Senate Bill 230 imposes a fee on oil and gas production to offset oil and gas pollution. That fee revenue will also help provide seed funding for the Front Range Passenger Rail project from Pueblo to Fort Collins and mountain rail from Denver to Craig.

Polis said that he sees housing affordability and growth as part of the transit issue. Today, those who want more affordable housing have to look at areas further and further away from their jobs, which require longer commutes. What he feels is needed is more housing closer

to job centers as well as on transit corners.

SB 184 and 230 will provide tens of millions of dollars in funding for local and statewide rail with new regional transit centers (RTC) across the state. The newest transit center is in Eagle County with more RTCs needed to make statewide rail a reality. Front Range Rail Transit with more RTCs will work through joint power authority among the named stakeholders including RTD, infrastructure owners, Amtrak, local authorities and community representatives to address Northern Colorado needs including Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins.

Front Range Rail will expand rapidly from its existing ski train to serve areas from Frazier to Steamboat Springs. This is important not just for tourism but for everyone as it will remove traffic from Interstate 70 and benefit both mountain commuters and anyone who wants mountain access.

Representative Neguse and Senator Hickenlooper are both working to help make this a reality for Colorado. With lower priced homes, more transit connections with less commute times there will be less pollution, less congestion, more affordability, less pressure on land, agriculture and water.

Chairman Nevitt asserted that communication is key to partnerships and success in determining what rail service is established. What is needed is rail service from Trinity to Fort Collins and beyond working with representatives from all the communities involved as well as the transit and infrastructure stakeholders.

All the Board members asserted that building trust is key especially for communities who have already approved service and are waiting for delivery.

In answer to questions from the audience, board members revealed hurdles. Mayor Newman said that RTD is readying a ballot measure that will allow them to hold on to funds that would necessarily have to be returned to the state under the Tabor Cap. If they don't receive funding, this will cause a delivery delay.

A report is due the legislature on Sept. 30 regarding delivery of the Denver to Fort Collins rail service. The Transportation Review Committee is to receive recommendations at the end of December. Roles and Responsibilities for the Denver to Fort Collins corridor are to be defined by March of 2025.

Chairman Nevitt said that if a funding bill for the required \$3.5 billion passes in 2026, delivery for this corridor could potentially be done in 5 years, with 6 years to get the Denver to Pueblo piece done. Tax support for operation and maintenance would be provided by service fees with potentially a 0.3% tax.

RTD, Mayor Peck and Chairman Nevitt said that initial capital expense estimates needed from the infrastructure owners will help finalize the plan and allow budget planning, but the delivery of a passenger rail system for Colorado is moving ahead with the coming feasibility and legislature reports foundational for next steps.

Micro transit solutions for those without cars or in need of door to door transit are already available for Niwot and Gunbarrel residents with service in and around Niwot and Gunbarrel as well as to Boulder, Longmont, Lafayette, and Louisville. The Via Mobility service includes solutions and support for low income persons. [Click here](#) for more information about Via Mobility Services. Colorado CarShare is an alternative to car ownership. [Click here](#) for more information about CarShare.

Part 2 of this series will be in the September 11, 2024 edition of the Left Hand Valley Courier and will examine the Transportation Summit's discussion of the Washington state model of successful inter-regional partnership and state rail travel.