



MEMORANDUM

Project: Front Range Passenger Rail Service Development Planning and Pre-National Environmental Policy Act (Pre-NEPA)

Memo Date: Thursday, April 23, 2020

To: Front Range Passenger Rail Project Team

From: Consultant Team

Subject: Previous Studies Summary – FINAL (revised)

PREVIOUS STUDIES SUMMARY

MEMO PURPOSE

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide a high level overview of the previous passenger rail studies along the Front Range and their influence in the development of the project. This memorandum builds on the work of these studies and stakeholder input to develop the parameters, study limits, and scoping of alternatives for the current Front Range Passenger Rail (FRPR) Project.

CONTEXT

Plans for a comprehensive passenger rail system serving the Front Range have been under consideration by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), local governmental coalitions, and advocacy groups for more than a decade. In 2017, the Southwest Chief and Front Range Passenger Rail Commission (Rail Commission) was re-established by the Colorado General Assembly (SB17-153) and tasked with facilitating development and operation of a passenger rail service along the Front Range.

In 2018, the Colorado General Assembly provided funding for the Rail Commission (SB18-001) to hire staff and retain a consultant team to begin the FRPR Project. With the funds provided by the General Assembly, the team was able to begin the first phase of work to advance preliminary environmental and service development planning. However, additional funds will be required to advance beyond the current project into the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and complete the Service Development Plan (SDP). Additionally, the Rail Commission partnered with CDOT. CDOT, who also has an interest in FRPR implementation, dedicated staff and resources to help the Rail Commission advance this phase of the FRPR Project.

With Rail Commission staff, supporting CDOT staff, and a consultant team in place, the FRPR Project kicked off in the summer of 2019. The team's focus is to complete the initial steps towards the planning, engineering, stakeholder engagement, governance, and environmental analysis of the project. The current phase of the project extends from approximately August 2019 through December 2020. The research of previous passenger rail studies presented in this memorandum support this initial phase of work.

PREVIOUS STUDIES AND PLANNING

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous planning studies have analyzed the feasibility of passenger rail along the Front Range and help to inform the purpose and need and alternatives analysis for the FRPR Project. Of the multiple studies reviewed, brief summaries of the most recent and/or relevant studies are presented below.

The Rocky Mountain Rail Authority (RMRA), an organization comprising various Colorado municipalities, counties, and transit authorities, led a study of statewide high-speed rail. This study included participation from CDOT, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), transportation planning regions (TPRs), and other local government agencies. The **RMRA High-Speed Rail Feasibility Study Business Plan** (RMRA, 2010) evaluated the ability of a high speed intercity passenger rail system in Colorado to meet Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) criteria and feasibility factors for federal funding consideration. The study analyzed a variety of alignments, passenger rail technologies, and service characteristics and concluded that high speed passenger rail generally paralleling the Interstate 25 (I-25) corridor from Fort Collins to Pueblo was feasible within FRA guidelines.

Building on past studies, including the RMRA study, CDOT led a study on high speed rail along the Front Range, using funds awarded to CDOT and the Regional Transportation District (RTD) by the FRA. The **CDOT Interregional Connectivity Study (ICS)** (CDOT, 2014) and associated **ICS Interoperability Report** (CDOT, 2017) provided preliminary recommendations for high speed passenger rail segments, technologies, and station locations to maximize ridership for both a Front Range passenger rail system and the RTD transit system. Study participants included MPOs, TPRs, railroad companies, the Colorado Association of Transit Agencies (CASTA), RTD, Denver International Airport (DEN), study area cities and counties. Both the RMRA study and the ICS evaluated passenger rail along the Front Range as a high speed train system spanning the length of the Front Range. While the RMRA Study and the ICS had similar objectives to advance passenger rail along the Front Range, each study's purpose and goals were slightly different. For example, these studies' alternatives evaluation criteria differed. The ICS analyses recommended to advance three alternatives for examination in a future SDP and future NEPA process. The alternatives differed in their use of highway, freight rail, and transit rail corridors; as well as service to DEN Airport and downtown Denver.

Through the **North I-25 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)** (CDOT, 2011) and associated **North I-25 EIS Commuter Rail Update** (CDOT, 2014), CDOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) approved a Record of Decision (ROD) supporting commuter rail between Fort Collins and Denver. The original EIS recommended an alignment following the United States Highway (US) 287/BNSF Railway (BNSF) rail alignment from Fort Collins to Longmont, then moving east to I-25 and connecting to RTD's North Metro line near State Highway (SH) 7. The Commuter Rail Update recommended moving forward with the EIS Commuter Rail Update recommendations, including right-of-way preservation in the commuter rail corridor. Study participants included corridor municipalities and counties, residents and community groups, MPOs, RTD, and state and federal resource agencies.

CDOT's **State Freight and Passenger Rail Plan** (CDOT, 2018) builds on past freight and passenger rail studies and initiatives, and was developed with participation from transportation industry groups, economic development organizations, local and state agencies, and coordination with surrounding states. The plan's

priority strategies include advancing passenger rail along the Front Range between Fort Collins and Trinidad, addressing freight rail needs and issues in the state, and enhancing economic connections. The plan concludes that there is no single region wide preferred alternative or alignment for passenger rail along the Front Range. The plan noted the Front Range would benefit from a visioning exercise to identify the most likely future rail scenarios and chart a path forward. The plan recommends five key delivery phases:

- Define the service vision – mobility vision, preferred alignment and route, technology, speed, station locations, service levels.
- Form governing authority – set up governance district, identify service operators, prepare funding and financing plan.
- Federal project development process – federal environmental clearance process, including an EIS for the full 260 mile corridor between Fort Collins and Trinidad.
- Final design and construction – design, construction, and initial operating activities for entire 260 mile corridor. Construction and capital cost estimates range from \$27 million/mile (single track, conventional speed, diesel trains) to \$80 million/mile (double track, high speed up to 180 miles per hour (mph), electric trains).
- Ribbon cutting – anticipated by 2030/2035.

Previous studies and projects have also analyzed portions of highway and transit solutions that are relevant to implementing passenger rail along the Front Range, and thus inform this project's alternatives analysis.

Attachment A summarizes all prior studies with relevance to the FRPR Project. While all of the previous studies described in Attachment A inform the current project, the alternatives evaluated in the RMRA Study, the ICS, and the North I-25 EIS are most relevant to the FRPR project. **Attachment B** summarizes the alternatives evaluations and recommendations from these three studies.

STATEWIDE AND REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

In addition to the project specific efforts to advance passenger rail, improving transit and travel options has been a consistent theme in CDOT's statewide planning initiatives and many regional planning initiatives by the metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) along the Front Range. All of the Front Range MPOs are participating in the FRPR planning process.

MPO/COG PLANNING

Multiple regional planning organizations along the Front Range have examined and supported FRPR through various planning efforts. The Denver Regional Council of Governments' (DRCOG) Metro Vision Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) has included elements of intercity rail in the Denver metropolitan region over several iterations of this plan. The recent 2045 RTP for the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments speaks directly to the desire for passenger rail connecting the Pikes Peak region to other parts of the Front Range and beyond. The North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization's (NFRMPO) 2045 RTP notes their support for strengthening rail coordination, addressing freight rail needs and issues, advancing FRPR, integrating planning processes, and enhancing economic connections related to rail. The Pueblo Area Council of Governments (PACOG) is supportive of re-instatement of passenger rail service into Pueblo. DRCOG, PPACG, NFRMPO, and PACOG are all actively supporting the FRPR study; as well as studies examining the extension of the Southwest Chief through their involvement with the Rail Commission.

CDOT PLANNING

Every four years, the state is required to develop a Statewide Transportation Plan that sets the vision for Colorado's transportation system. The current **2040 Statewide Transportation Plan** (CDOT, 2015) was adopted by the Transportation Commission in 2015 and is currently being updated for the 2045 planning horizon. The 2040 plan is corridor based, including evaluation and visions for approximately 350 transportation corridors statewide to prioritize transportation investments. The planning effort involves substantial public input. Reducing congestion and increasing travel choices were key themes of public input into the 2040 plan. The 2040 plan documented substantial public interest in and need for improved transit and better bicycle infrastructure.

The 2045 plan update began in May 2019. The new plan, named **Your Transportation Plan** (CDOT, 2019), takes a broader look at transportation priorities across the state, focusing on community challenges where infrastructure investments can make the most difference. The expansive and inclusive transportation planning effort includes a data driven needs assessment and extensive public and stakeholder input to set the 20 year vision and to identify a 10 year priority pipeline of infrastructure investments (projects). Through this process, three common themes emerged that Coloradans across the state agreed on:

- Road condition and safety need to be addressed.
- Growth and congestion are impacting quality of life.
- Lack of travel options is an issue.

Statewide, lack of rail and transit options were identified by 19 percent of Coloradans as the most important issue to address. Not surprisingly, the priority of expanded travel options in rapidly growing Front Range communities was even higher.

REFERENCES

CDOT. (2011). *North I-25 Final EIS*. Denver: CDOT.

CDOT. (2014). *Interregional Connectivity Study Final Report*. Denver: Division of Transit and Rail.

CDOT. (2014). *North I-25 EIS Commuter Rail Update Final Report*. Denver: CDOT.

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RMRA. (2010). *High-Speed Rail Feasibility Study Business Plan*. Denver: RMRA.