



MEMORANDUM

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

Meeting Date: September 15, 2020

Time: 1 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Location: Google Meet

Attendees: North Segment Coalition Members

ATTENDEES

COALITION MEMBERS AND SWC & FRPR COMMISSIONERS

Nathan Anderson, Union Pacific Railroad SWC & FRPR Commissioner
Allison Baxter, City of Greeley Planning Division
Bill Becker, Loveland Chamber of Commerce
Drew Brooks, City of Fort Collins
Marian Duran, City of Greeley Planning Division
Aaron Fodge, Colorado State University
Katie Guthrie, City of Loveland Public Works
Tammy Herreid, Smart Commute Metro North / NATA
Myron Hora, WSP
Phyllis Kane, ColoRail
Becky Karasko, NFRMPO, SWC & FRPR Commissioner
Suzette Mallette, NFRMPO, Executive Director
Kim Meyer, Town of Johnstown
Colleen Whitlow, Town of Mead

CDOT EMPLOYEES

Josie Hadley, CDOT Region 4 Planner
Karen Schneiders, CDOT Region 4 Planner
James Usher, CDOT Region 4 North Program Engineer

PROJECT TEAM

Cristina Beermann, Strategic Communications Coordinator, HDR
Tara Bettale, Strategic Communications Manager, HDR

Jeff Dawson, Transportation Engineer, CDOT
Spencer Dodge, Commission Liaison, SWC & FRPR Commission
Daniel Estes, Program Associate, CDR Associates
Randy Grauberger, Project Director, SWC & FRPR Commission
Jamie Grim, Local Government Liaison, CDOT
Sarah Grossi, Front Range Passenger Rail Intern, CDOT
Timothy Hoover, Communications Integration Lead, CDOT
Steve Long, Program Manager, HDR
Carla Perez, Consultant Project Manager, HDR
Jeffrey Range, Program Manager, CDR Associates
David Singer, Environmental Policy and Biological Resources Section Manager, CDOT
Lisa Streisfeld, Assistant Director of Mobility Services, CDOT
Mandy Whorton, Principal, Peak Consulting Group, LLC

MEETING SUMMARY

The following summary was written based on the presentation and discussions that took place during the meeting. Attachments to this summary include the meeting agenda and presentation slides.

WELCOME, AGENDA, AND INTRODUCTIONS

Jeffrey Range, Project Team, opened the meeting by going over Google Meet protocols and asking participants to take a poll using Menti.com. This was to test the polling site for a later survey.

Randy Grauberger, Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission (SWC & FRPR Commission) Project Director, welcomed the Coalition members to the meeting and thanked them for their participation. He discussed the agenda and the purpose of the meeting which included discussions on the work that has been done on developing line alternatives, the July online public meeting, ridership data, and potential partnerships.

Jeffrey Range invited participants to introduce themselves as well as make a comment in the chat stating their name and organization. Jeffrey noted that attendees were free to jump in or put a question or comment into the Google Meet chat.

ONLINE PUBLIC MEETING SUMMARY

Tara Bettale, Strategic Communications Manager, HDR began the presentation by describing the highlights and outcomes of the July online public meeting. Tara stated the success of the meeting, revealing that it was open for a month and received nearly 9,000 total users and 10,000 total sessions. She then went on to say that residents of Colorado Springs were the top users of the public meeting with the most hits. However, the meeting had a diverse geographic spread.

Tara also discussed zip code participation, which she noted was interesting because while they saw many participants of the online meeting located in the Front Range area, participants were also responding from outside the State and Country.

Tara moved on to unveil what participants responded to as being most important to them for the Front Range Passenger Rail. The results included (in order of importance) station location being close to their origin and destination, the ability to interconnect with other modes, and reasonable travel times. It was also acknowledged that the majority of respondents' primary preferences were for an alignment that passes through Downtown Denver, followed by an alignment that connects to the Denver International Airport. Tara then stated that all responses could be viewed on the project website.

Looking at other data from the online public meeting, Tara discussed the respondents' primary purpose for utilizing Front Range Passenger Rail. According to results, the majority of respondents would utilize FRPR for recreation/leisure, followed by commuting. However, Tara did state that modeling that the FRPR team has been conducting shows that commuting will actually generate the majority of ridership.

Tara closed by going through some open ended comments that were received. The comments were tagged based on sentiment of the comment being either negative, positive, or neutral. A large majority of comments were positive (69%) with only one out of 500 being relation to COVID concerns and long-term transit use, which showcases the public's interest for the future of transit in Colorado.

Participants asked questions or made comments regarding the online public meeting including:

- Attendee was surprised to see recreation and leisure to be at #1 and asks if this would have anything to do with access to airports and travel. Tara revealed that yes, there is some relation to using the alignment to get to Denver to then use the A line to get to the airport. There was a lot of commentary in the open ended questions about coming to Denver for events. It seemed that many respondents work nearby where they live so they can walk or bike for commuting purposes. The common theme was really on travelling further for fun. Randy affirmed saying that some open ended questions revealed some people would like to take FRPR directly to the airport, and some said they would only use it to get to Downtown Denver to connect with the A-Line.
 - On the same point, Tara stated that you may have broad ridership for people who are periodic riders. When in reality, the bulk ridership is actually for commuting purposes. Carla Perez, Consultant Project Manager, HDR agreed that modeling is consistent with this point. Jeffrey Range also jumped in to point out that the number of trips will dictate what the primary purpose is.
- Interesting to see respondents from Southern Alaska and Europe. Europe being a leader in public transportation, attendee wondered if those participants commented on any close-ended questions. Tara answered saying the project team cannot know who put in what zip codes or what they said. The overall opinion is that we should continue to push this project to better align with the transit systems in Europe and Asia. People want to rush to get to where other places in the world are with transit.

Jeffrey invited participants to provide feedback on online polls and outreach, and whether or not we should continue with these surveys in the future:

- Multiple participants suggested a new poll to further demonstrate momentum after the 2020 election cycle. They believe it will gauge changes as we evolve out of COVID.
- Carla mentioned all polls are showing similar results thus far and that is a positive sign. Jeffrey closed the conversation by noting a new survey could help illuminate what people are thinking post-COVID. General agreement that another future survey would be useful.

PROJECT UPDATES

The presentation was then handed off to David Singer, Environmental Policy and Biological Resources Section Manager, CDOT and Mandy Whorton, Principal, Peak Consulting Group, LLC who went on to discuss technical assumptions and recommendations including methodologies and assumptions, the corridor as a whole, and specific details of the North Segment.

LEVEL 2 EVALUATION PROCESS

David Singer began by discussing the project team’s methodology and assumptions as well as the process of gathering information. He noted that currently, the project is in the Level 2 Evaluation phase of the process where alternative alignments can be compared. This can be taken into the next phase, NEPA, which will help FRPR compete for federal funds. David went on to outline each step of this phase:

Step 1: Developing alignments from corridors

In April, the project team had focused on more feasible “backbone” alignments, knowing that all of them have opportunities to connect further North and South. The result was three distinct corridors. David referred to the map of alignment options (teal, yellow, and purple alignments). The project team has worked over many months to improve speeds and travel times along these alignments. Additionally, the project team spoke with community members about assumptions on where stations are going to be placed. David stated that putting these where residents want, will allow FRPR to increase ridership. *This step is complete.*

Step 2: Performance and Operating Assumptions

Number of trains per day, times of service, and costs based on modeling were discussed. David also noted the importance of looking at the possibility of secondary stations where fewer stops occur. All of these factors will help the project team better understand who is using FRPR and when. *This step is complete.*

Step 3: Ridership Projections

David continued to step three on ridership and stated that the model being used does not look at what people are excited about today, but looking 20 years into the future to understand where we will be and what will be needed then. To complete modeling, census data, homes, nearby, and other data is being used as an input, resulting in projections for ridership, where trips are happening along the corridor, etc. *This step is complete.*

Step 4: Cost Estimating

It was made clear that the project team does not have these numbers right now. They are looking at the cost to build, but also maintain and operate, and must follow federal standards to get federal money. The cost of operating and maintenance will largely depend on how many trains and train equipment sets there will be. That information will ultimately inform costs, and will be discussed further at a subsequent coalition meeting. *This step is in progress.*

Step 5: Community and Environmental Impacts

David emphasized that the project team has a great understanding of these issues up and down corridor. At this level of the process, the team is focusing on differentiators and are considering a multitude of potential impacts at a high level. *This step is largely complete.*

Step 6: Comparative Evaluation

Finally, David walked through the criteria being used to compare alternative alignments, considering what is important to stakeholders and residents along the corridor. *This step is in progress.*

Participants asked questions or made comments regarding the current phase and methodology of the project including:

- A clarification was requested in which a participant was unclear on whether David was referring to community and environmental impacts from the rail line or other modes of transportation. David clarified, saying he was referring to the rail line.
- Concerned that any analysis when project team gets down to decision making would ideally look at environmental impact relief that other corridors would achieve, such as along I-25, 287, etc. Respondent stated concern on community disruption. David answered, saying that congestion on I-25 is something the team is focusing on, looking out to 2045.

ALIGNMENT ALTERNATIVES

Mandy Whorton continued the presentation, moving on to the three alignment alternatives.

BNSF Freight Rail Alignment

This alignment focuses on existing transportation corridors to avoid community disruptions. Mandy emphasized that the project team did engineering to smooth out curves to reduce travel times and increase speeds, and revealed that this option was overall the best of the three considered. She went on to point out that this alignment would serve 2.2 to 2.9 million riders per year, with the difference being the addition of secondary stations to the model. The time on this alignment is longer, but ridership

increased, with some of the strongest ridership seen within MPO area, between Denver and Boulder, and between adjacent stations.

Mandy also addressed environmental Impacts of this alignment saying that introducing new transit system along this route (or any route) would result in substantial impact. Overall, there is a lot of public support for this alignment, especially because it goes in between Boulder and Union Station.

BNSF + North 1-25 EIS Commuter Rail Alignment

This alignment is the same as the BNSF alignment south of Denver Union Station, but as it travels north, instead of following out to Boulder, this alignment follows RTD North Metro line up to Thornton. Mandy stated that this alignment has notably less ridership, primarily due to the lack of the Boulder connection, as well as less opportunities for partnerships. However, potential for adding secondary stations is possible here and would increase this ridership. Also, impacts to open space, parks, streams, and wildlife habitat would be less compared to the BNSF alignment that traverses Boulder County open space.

I-25/E-470 Highway Alignment

This alignment has almost identical base ridership to the BNSF alignment. Because it doesn't travel along population centers or planned commuter rail corridors, there is less of an opportunity for secondary station ridership but does have potential to integrate with CDOT mobility hubs along I-25 served by Bustang. However, this alignment does have much stronger ridership to south compared to the other two alignment options. This alignment would also offer less of an impact to water and parks, but provide limited potential for track and Right-of-Way sharing with freight railroads.

Mandy concluded that all three alignments provide good range of options, different partnership opportunities, and impacts and seem reasonable to carry forward into NEPA.

Participants asked questions or made comments regarding the alignment alternatives including:

- In response to the BNSF alignment: For areas of ecological significance or areas where there is a high percentage of wildlife migratory patterns, how closely has this been discussed, planned, and analyzed? What are some mitigation considerations? And would you consider eco-bridges or tunnels to help large wildlife cross over to natural areas/corridors that may potentially be disrupted with this project? David answered that there has been a lot of conversation with Colorado Parks and Wildlife about this issue. The project team knows where herds are moving and where they like to go. In relation to what residents of Colorado are used to with the road being a barrier, in reality a train coming and going 20 times a day poses a much smaller issue/impact than the interstate. As the team gets more into the NEPA process a better understanding of the true impact will be identified. There will certainly be some grade separations, but probably not a wildlife crossing.
 - Lisa Streisfeld, Assistant Director of Mobility Services, CDOT, affirmed that the potential tunnel for FRPR at Monument Hill will mitigate impacts to wildlife. The project team will look at

oversizing culverts to mitigate impacts, because these culverts can facilitate habitat connectivity as well.

- In response to the BNSF alignment: Another respondent commented that it seems counter-intuitive that the travel time would be the same going to Boulder or not. Randy responded, saying that the average speed is lower but it is shorter distance wise. The average speed is lower because FRPR would need to be operating parallel to RTD's north metro line this would be a serious constraint.
- Most public transit services are operating 60-70% below pre-COVID levels. Do the ridership projections for this project consider potential impacts from COVID? Are there concerns that ridership will never fully recover? Mandy answered, projections do not include behavioral factors that might affect travel choices. The project team's suspicion is that it will most likely return to normal when this project is up and running in a decade.
- Another comment suggested that missing/by-passing existing downtown locations seems like a mistake. Mandy responded that there is still an ability on the E-470 alignment to integrate with RTD, just not as strongly. Randy added that open ended comments addressed the same concern. Many respondents noted that in the Downtown Denver area, residents have experienced the noise and freight rail for a long time, and they would like to see passengers on those rail lines.

NORTH SEGMENT

David walked through the specific considerations involving the north segment. The goal of the project team is to create a high level vision of providing choice and maximizing ridership. That is what the I-25 / E-470 Highway Alignment, does in the north. This alignment leverages mobility hubs. Here there is also a transportation corridor where CDOT could be a potential partner for FRPR. This line has the ability to serve the Denver International Airport. However, there is no ability to get into heart of larger communities in north. With that said, northern communities have said that their vision for rail does go through this specific freight alignment. There are pros and cons with each alignment.

There are three primary markets in the north: Longmont, Loveland, and Fort Collins. David began a discussion about each market, what the characteristics and plans for those areas are, and then invited feedback on alignment options.

Longmont—there are existing plans for rail to south Boulder and north to Loveland/Fort Collins. BNSF alignment would serve the stations/locations that the Longmont community has identified as being preferable. Ridership in Longmont on the BNSF line is three to four times more than on the other alignments.

Loveland—the freight alignment can integrate into a planned commuter rail station in Loveland. There is also a high ridership demand here to get to Union Station.

Fort Collins—there is a lot of activity between Loveland and Fort Collins. Also a real desire to take FRPR to the Denver International Airport as a key origin/destination. With all three alignment options, the challenge is getting into the heart of Fort Collins. There are few access points into Fort Collins, and therefore it will be important for FRPR to integrate with existing rail lines.

David invited participants from these three markets to pose questions or comment on feelings on alignment options:

- Before participants commented, Randy wanted to highlight that while Berthoud (located in between Longmont and Loveland) doesn't have the same population density, the FRPR project team has been encouraged to look at the city for a secondary station. It was found adding secondary stations along the corridor increase ridership by 20%. A representative from Berthoud then noted their support for an alignment running through the city, and understands that while they might not get every train, they would love some coming through the area.
- Jeffrey then posed a question to participants wondering if there is something missing that would get these markets excited. Anything the project team should be focusing on.
 - A participant responded that the consensus in the north part of the Metro area is that cities feel left out. FRPR may be hard pressed to get support from areas that have been hung out to dry by RTD. There are a series of north metro communities that really want rail but have been ignored. It would be a challenge to get their support if they aren't included. Overall northern Colorado residents are passionate about getting transit in northern section. David answered this concern saying that the project team wants to overcome this and that this obstacle has been front of center. The presentation focuses on technical results and comparisons. But it is sometimes hard to quantify political or partnership comparisons. Mandy concluded the conversation assuring that the project team will be recommending that all three alignments move into NEPA process. This will be a continuing conversation and no final alignment decision have been made yet.
- Is there an opportunity to use the Great Western line to link to downtown Fort Collins? Randy answered, yes. The project team has had two meetings with representatives from Great Western. They are anxious to continue to work with FRPR.
- Jeffrey asked if there are, at this point, any alignment preferences:
 - Two alignments described for the north segment are loaded with political pressure in Loveland.
 - There hasn't been a collective decision on what alignment is preferred for Loveland
 - Greeley is interested in the Great Western corridor for transit of some kind so it would be good to know how Great Western ties in to the three alignment concepts.

ADVANCING FRPR- NEXT STEPS

Randy began the final conversation, stating the notable momentum FRPR has, being endorsed by state legislature. An article in the Denver Post even included positive comments from State Senate President Leroy Garcia. Additionally, Amtrak has been creating a new network modernization program, which would create a \$30 Billion grant program for new state short distance corridors. Colorado is at the top of Amtrak's list for new rail corridors in the country because of the established commission, the completed transit studies, and the evident support for passenger rail up and down the Front Range. The Proposal has cleared the House of Representatives, and if eventually passed in the Senate, Amtrak has targeted over \$2 billion for the Colorado Front Range for instituting state supported Amtrak service from Pueblo to Fort Collins.

Carla then continued by detailing the next steps of the project. She pointed out the framework for advancing to the next steps, which includes three phases: Policy, Program, and Project. All three are key to the project being implemented down the road. Carla also reviewed governance options for the project: Public Rail Authority, Front Range Passenger Rail Authority, and the ability to expand the current Commission's authority. Carla specified that these were the same three options presented last year.

ISSUES AND DECISIONS DISCUSSED

- Jeffrey asked how CDOT can have these conversations with northern communities
 - Participant commented that Randy is coming to speak to residents of 13 communities at NATA meeting in late September.
- Jeffrey then asked, if plans for rail already exist in a current community plan already, how does it?
 - Only Berthoud answered stating that plans for commuter rail exist

CLOSING REMARKS

Randy thanked the meeting attendees and encouraged anyone to reach out to the project team with questions. All participants should be looking out for another coalition meeting in early December where new information on the progress of the project will be presented.