

May 13, 2025

WORK SESSION AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY



City Council

STAFF

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SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

Transfort Optimization Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, Transfort and FC Moves launched the Transfort Optimization Plan to ensure Fort Collins' transit system reflects community priorities and operates within sustainable financial limits. The plan aims to balance community priorities, explore innovative options like microtransit, and incorporate lessons from peer agencies. This effort will help the City make informed, community-driven decisions about how to invest in transit for the greatest impact. The Optimization Plan will serve as a roadmap for delivering safe, reliable, and efficient transit service well into the future.

GENERAL DIRECTION SOUGHT AND SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

1. What additional questions or feedback do Councilmembers have about the three concepts?
2. What feedback do Councilmembers have on the proposed criteria to evaluate the transit scenarios?

BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

In late 2024, Transfort and FC Moves launched the Transfort Optimization Plan, a strategic initiative aimed at aligning Fort Collins' transit system with community needs, financial realities, and future growth. The Optimization Plan seeks to recalibrate services to balance community priorities, best practices and financial sustainability while exploring innovations such as micro-transit and post-pandemic recovery lessons from peer agencies. Budgetary constraints remain a critical factor, which are summarized in the bullets below:

- The current deficit to operate 2019 service levels today, combined with the funding needed to build out the Transit Master Plan, results in a **total gap of \$13 million annually**. A further breakdown of this funding gap is provided in the next bullets.

- Fully building out the Transit Master Plan by 2040 necessitates an additional \$15 million annually, however the passage of the dedicated transit tax is expected to provide \$5 million annually narrowing this gap to approximately \$10 million.
- Additionally, operating 2019 service levels under current conditions would require an additional \$2.7 million annually, driven by increased inflationary costs in personnel, fuel, and maintenance.

Project phases: Each project phase will be informed by prior work and build on that information to provide a clear and consistent narrative of this planning process to assist in final decision making.

Project Work Plan & Kick-Off (Sept. – Nov. 2024): Develop work plan and public involvement plan. Stakeholder kick-off meeting and project introduction to select city boards and commissions. *Complete.*

Best Practices & Literature Review (Oct. – Dec. 2024): Review peer transit agencies for pandemic recovery and microtransit best practices. *Complete.*

Background & Current Conditions (Oct. 2024 – Jan. 2025): Review Transfort's background and current conditions and compare with best practices. *Complete.*

Innovation Zone Discovery & Analysis (Jan. – Mar. 2025): Develop goals, review operational parameters, and cost/benefit analysis for microtransit. *Complete.*

Scenarios & Trade-Offs (Mar. – Jun. 2025): Develop three system alternatives for growth and adaptation under resource constraints. *In progress.*

Community Dialogue (Jun. – Aug. 2025): Engage community with scenarios and trade-offs to determine recommendations.

Summary of Work Completed to Date

As part of the foundational work of the project, several reviews and analyses were conducted.

Background & Current Conditions

A complete review of Transfort's current conditions was completed to understand recent performance, trends, best practices, organizational dynamics, ridership recovery, opportunities and challenges. The report documented the challenges to rebuild service with existing resources, current service development processes, recent system performance analysis and the financial picture for operations and capital. The review found that:

- Ridership is starting to rebound but is still significantly below 2019 levels and has not kept pace with return to service efforts.
- MAX and HORN ridership have been disproportionately impacted, declining at higher rates than other routes.
- System productivity has declined while costs have gone up.
- Operators are overall pleased with work conditions.
- Service changes are operationally difficult to implement due to internal technological limitations.

- Marketing fare free is important and showing results.

Travel Market Assessment

Using a travel market analysis tool called Replica, our team analyzed travel patterns within Fort Collins to understand what's changed between 2019 and now. Key findings included:

- Use of private auto as the primary mode has increased between 2019 and 2024.
- Transit use, biking, and walking have decreased between 2019 and 2024.
- AM and PM travel peaks that existed in 2019 have smoothed out in 2024 with travel in 2024 more concentrated and distributed between noon and 6PM.
- Trip duration has decreased between 2019 and 2024 with a higher percentage of short trips in 2024.
- Overall travel patterns are similar but show increases in travel within and between south and southeast Fort Collins as well as midtown.

Ridership Recovery Best Practices Review

Every transit agency in the country lost ridership and experienced challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic. Many agencies like Transfort continue to struggle to fully recover lost ridership to pre-pandemic levels due to a variety of factors, but many agencies have had success adapting to internal and external factors to grow ridership. This review provided information about similar-sized transit agencies in peer communities (college towns with similar demographics) that have successfully recovered ridership faster than the national average, strategies employed to bring back service, and examples of successful implementation practices.

Key findings included:

- **Demographic Alignment Drives Success:** Agencies that tailored services to specific demographic groups—such as students, low-income populations, or commuters—achieved stronger ridership recovery.
- **Flexibility Boosts Resilience:** Implementing flexible service features, such as dynamic scheduling or flex stops, allowed agencies to adapt more effectively to changing ridership demands.
- **Focus on Core Efficiency:** In most cases, agencies found that reducing service areas and prioritizing high-frequency, reliable service in key demand zones—such as university corridors or commuter routes—proved to be more effective than maintaining broad, less targeted coverage.
- **Community Engagement Is Critical:** Transparent, inclusive public engagement processes built trust, aligned services with community needs, and strengthened recovery efforts.
- **Innovative Workforce Solutions Are Essential:** Partnerships with educational institutions and creative recruitment models, like Unitrans' part-time student drivers, effectively addressed operator shortages.
- **Fare Policy Matters:** Fare-free or reduced-fare initiatives played a significant role in restoring ridership confidence, particularly for transit-dependent and underserved populations.

Microtransit Best Practices Review

A comprehensive review of microtransit best practices and an analysis of peer communities that provide microtransit services was completed to gain valuable insights about what makes microtransit succeed. We also interviewed several peer agencies and microtransit service

providers to enhance our analysis and deepen our understanding of challenges and successes related to planning and implementing microtransit programs.

Key findings included:

- Establishing clear goals at the onset of the planning process is essential
- Communicate the benefits and tradeoffs of microtransit to the public and elected officials early in the process, which may not be seen through financials
- Comingling paratransit and microtransit services increase efficiency and reduce demand for paratransit services
- Comprehensive community engagement and marketing is key to the success of microtransit services and helps drive demand
- All parties involved in the implementation of the microtransit service should be involved and informed early in the planning process
- It is important to identify long-term funding sources to sustain microtransit services past initial grant funding
- For microtransit services to be inclusive and accessible, multiple booking options such as via an app, website, and call center must be available
- Zone size greatly impacts demand, service level, and customer wait times. Example: Larger zones can result in longer wait and travel times and less wait and travel times for smaller zones.
- Microtransit can be an effective transit solution for areas with lower population density that may be hard to serve with fixed-route services
- Service reliability and regular, low wait times are important for retaining ridership

System Concepts

The project team worked with the Community and Technical Advisory Committees (CAC and TAC) to define how future Transfort system scenarios would be developed. We proposed six possible concepts that the CAC and TAC distilled down to three including:

1. **Travel Patterns.** High frequency routes for highest demand travel patterns:¹ Prioritizes a targeted number of high frequency, direct fixed routes in areas with highest amount of existing travel.
2. **Rider Demand.** Focused on rider demand / transit propensity: Prioritizes direct fixed routes with targeted high frequency to best serve areas with the highest current or anticipated rider demand, based on demographic factors or likelihood to use transit.
3. **Condensed Fixed Route + Microtransit.** Condensed fixed-route network with microtransit coverage options: Provides a more condensed fixed-route network for only the areas with a combination of highest demand and need, and microtransit coverage for low density areas.

These concepts are currently being developed into three detailed transit system scenarios which will be complete ahead of public outreach in June and July. These scenarios will provide a framework for showing the community contrasting ideas for how Transfort service could operate in the future. The scenarios will differ from each other and from how services are currently operated. However, there will be some shared commonalities. For example, there are areas with

¹ Travel refers to all modes of travel and is predominantly single-occupant vehicles (SOVs).

both high demand travel patterns and high transit demand/propensity (E.g. West Elizabeth Corridor).

In addition to the detailed scenarios, evaluation criteria are being developed to help assess the impact of each scenario. In the next stage of public engagement, each criterion and its level of impact (e.g. high, medium, low, none) will be displayed alongside each of the three scenarios. The criteria, combined with the proposed routes and level of service in each scenario, will assist the community in making informed decisions about the future of transit service. Criteria under consideration include: environmental impacts, ridership implications, equity considerations, City priorities (Land Use, 15-Minute Cities), cost effectiveness, community health impacts, and mitigation strategies to offset impacts.

As we move beyond summer outreach around these scenarios, we will then work towards building the preferred, final vision for Transfort – this vision will likely not be one of the three scenarios but will rather be a blend of elements from the three scenarios.

Public Engagement – Past and Upcoming

Central to this effort is a robust and inclusive public involvement process designed to ensure meaningful participation from diverse populations, with a particular emphasis on transit-dependent groups. This approach will help prioritize community needs and set measurable outcomes.

As mentioned above, a CAC and TAC were formed to meet at key points throughout the project to provide guidance on analyses and materials. The CAC is comprised of representatives from different organizational and community groups, whereas the TAC is comprised of City of Fort Collins staff with planning and technical expertise from FC Moves and Transfort. The CAC and TAC meetings are combined throughout the entire project. There are four key project milestones where the CAC and TAC are meeting and providing feedback:

1. Project Kickoff Meeting (Inform) – October 2024
2. Vision and Prioritization (Collaborate) – March 2025
3. Scenarios & Tradeoffs (Collaborate) – June 2025
4. Project Recommendations (Inform) – Late Summer 2025

The CAC is comprised of members from the following organizations or groups:

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|---------------------------------|--|
| • Active Modes Advisory Board | • Large Employers (e.g. Advanced Energy, Broadcom) |
| • ARC of Larimer County | • NFRMPO |
| • Bohemian Foundation | • PSD |
| • CARE Housing | • Rescue Mission |
| • CSU | • Strong Towns |
| • DARTAC | • Summit Stone Health |
| • Front Range Community College | • Transportation Board |
| • Housing Catalyst | |

A summary of public engagement conducted to date

Prior to this effort, extensive public engagement was undertaken as part of the Transit Master Plan (TMP), adopted in 2019. The following high-level themes summarize the transit elements that received strong and consistent support from the public: faster and more frequent service, better multimodal connections, more regional service and willingness to invest in transit. These elements are reflected in the transit concepts developed for this study.

In summer and fall of 2024, staff conducted the first phase of engagement with the CAC and TAC, as well as a variety of Boards and Commissions including: Transportation Board, Senior Advisory Board, Disability Advisory Board, Climate Equity Committee, and Dial-A-Ride & Transit Accessibility Committee to introduce this effort and obtain high level feedback. A second meeting was held in March 2025 with the TAC and CAC to obtain input on six proposed concepts. The top three concepts selected in the engagement process are being used as guiding principles in developing three detailed transit scenarios. This stage of engagement confirmed that the priorities of the TMP are still relevant today, especially faster and more frequent service.

The next phase of public engagement

The three detailed transit scenarios, currently in development, will be ready to present to the public for feedback by the end of May. The next phase of public engagement to obtain input on the three contrasting scenarios will be extensive and concentrated throughout June. The goal is to conduct transparent, inclusive public engagement processes to build trust, and align services with community needs, and strengthen recovery efforts.

Because two key stakeholders, Colorado State University and Poudre School District are not in session during June, staff have been conducting outreach to both entities in April and May in the form of surveys, tabling at events, and social media. The surveys include questions about what is currently working with the transit system, which routes they are using, gaps and barriers using the system, questions about the West Elizabeth corridor and what service hours would best meet their needs. The surveys also include several open-ended questions so specific feedback can be provided.

This phase of engagement will be both targeted and broad-based, capturing as many people as possible in the process including both current and potential transit riders. The following groups (in alphabetical order), identified in the PIP are populations that the public involvement strategies will seek to engage but are not limited to:

- Boards and Commissions
- Business representatives
- Colorado State University
- Community members with disabilities
- Culturally diverse community members
- Fort Collins transit riders
- Latino/Hispanic and Spanish-speaking community members
- Lower-income and underserved community members
- Older adults (Ages 60+)
- Residents in Fort Collins
- Transit-dependent populations
- Transit, active modes and sustainability advocates
- Unhoused community members
- Youth/schools

Engagement has been planned in some capacity with the following organizations:

- Active Modes Advisory Board
- Chamber of Commerce – Local Legislative Affairs Committee
- City Council
- Climate Equity Committee
- Colorado State University
- Community Connectors
- Dial-a-Ride and Transit Accessibility Committee
- Disability Advisory Board
- Housing Catalyst
- Larimer County Mobility Committee
- Larimer County Office on Aging
- Lived Experience Advisory Council
- Midtown Business Improvement District
- North Fort Collins Business Association
- Poudre School District
- Senior Advisory Board
- Transportation Board

Staff cross-referenced the groups identified in the Public Involvement Plan with planned engagement efforts to ensure they were all being included in the process. In addition to targeted outreach, broad-based outreach will be conducted to capture people who live and work in Fort Collins.

Engagement Tools

A variety of engagement tools will be employed throughout the month of June to obtain feedback on the three transit scenarios. The goal is to share information about the project and direct people to the [Our City project webpage](#) where there will be a link to provide input on the scenarios. Additionally, there will be opportunities to provide input on the three scenarios verbally and on physical boards at in-person meetings and events. Specific tools being used include:

- Advertising, information sharing and survey links
 - City of Fort Collins website – [Our City project webpage](#)
 - Social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, NextDoor, etc.)
 - Physical flyers (posted at key locations such as libraries, government buildings, and at events)
 - Emails to key partners
 - Press release with links to [Our City project webpage](#)
- Open House
- Tabling at events – both project-specific and other City and stakeholder events

- Meetings
 - Boards and Commissions
 - TAC and CAC
 - Targeted groups (e.g. Chamber, Lived Experience Advisory Council (LEAC), etc.)
- Focus Group
 - Some organizations have been offered an opportunity to hold focus groups, if interested.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Presentation