



## A Bold Vision for Western Rail DRAFT Concept Paper: March 2024

### Synopsis

The State of Colorado should establish a **Colorado Rail Authority** that owns, builds, and manages the operation of convenient, efficient, and environmentally-sustainable passenger rail service connecting the Front Range cities with the world-renowned and high-demand mountain town destinations of Colorado.

Transportation between the Front Range and the mountain towns of the Interstate 70 (I-70) corridor remains one of the largest and most visible transportation challenges faced by Coloradans today. Colorado's two densest corridors for population and tourism are the Front Range (Pueblo to Fort Collins) and the I-70 Mountain Corridor extending westward from Denver to Grand Junction. Today, road travel is the overwhelmingly dominant form of transportation between the Front Range and mountains due to historical Federal highway investment and a lack of substantial state investment in any other modes.

Expansion of I-70 highway infrastructure is not the best solution to improve connectivity between these regions. The I-70 corridor is geographically-constrained, with expansion projects costing billions. Additionally, any highway investment cannot overcome the risks and disruptions from severe mountain weather and driver error that result in accidents. Often, the highway experiences full closure for hours or days. CDOT has conducted numerous studies to find alternative modes of transportation that can relieve I-70. Sadly, none have quantified the benefits of conventional rail that utilizes primarily-existing infrastructure.

### It is time for Colorado to:

1. Establish a Colorado Rail Authority, as an agency of the Colorado Department of Transportation, directed to owning and building rail infrastructure.
2. Position this Authority with funding to purchase existing rail infrastructure.
3. Introduce new passenger rail service between Denver International Airport, Union Station, and Grand Junction. Additional branch lines can serve Steamboat Springs, Craig, and Montrose.
4. Establish an I-70 Freight Traffic Bypass via a Truck-on-Train Bridge between East Denver (near Tower Road and I-70), and west of Grand Junction.





## Background on Existing Infrastructure

Investments in Western Rail will facilitate safer I-70 driving conditions for cars AND offer a more affordable, attractive, and environmentally-sustainable travel option for Coloradans and out-of-state visitors.

The I-70 highway is the only major four lane highway over the Continental Divide in the State. Congestion on I-70 has currently exceeded capacity, especially during peak recreational travel times. It is prone to regular shutdowns during inclement weather. As a consequence, Colorado's mountain destinations remain insufficiently connected to the largest population centers of the Front Range.

There are two vital rail lines connecting the Front Range to the Western Slope that are ripe for public investment. The northern route extends west from Denver via the Moffat Tunnel, this is the current route of Amtrak's California Zephyr and Winter Park Express, further west it branches to Steamboat Springs and Craig. The southern route extends west from Pueblo via Tennessee Pass (out of service since 1998). Both routes converge at Dotsero along I-70 to serve Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction. Another branch line extends south from Grand Junction to Montrose.

At present, the Moffat Tunnel route is used primarily to transport unit trains of crude oil. Each of these 90 car trains contain a total of over 2.5 million gallons of HAZMAT placarded toxic crude. The trains travel through the fragile and semi-unstable canyons of the Colorado River, the Fraser River, or South Boulder Creek. More than 40 million people in the southwestern United States rely on clean water flowing in these rivers. If an oil train derailed, spilling its contents into a river, the results will be catastrophic. It is unconscionable that such risks are being taken. These toxic trains should be diverted. States do not have the authority to regulate the transit of legal commodities through their territories by railroad companies, even when the train cars have HAZMAT placards. The best long-term solution is for the State of Colorado to own the line. Then the State can decide the parameters and commodities to allow over their rails.

## The Solution

**The State of Colorado can expand its public transportation services most efficiently by equipping itself to own and operate passenger rail services between the Front Range and Mountain Communities.** Such service can be further extended by Bustang operations. The **Moffat Tunnel Line** and the out of service **Tennessee Pass Line** are under-utilized freight rail infrastructure which the state must be equipped to purchase. When owned, these routes can be employed for passenger rail operations as well as a "truck-on-train" rail bridge and still allows rail operators (UP, BNSF, Amtrak, Rocky Mountaineer, etc.) trackage rights to serve businesses in Colorado. To position Colorado for success, a state-level authority must be created with the directive and funding to acquire, build, and operate passenger rail.

While both routes have tremendous potential for passenger service, the Moffat Tunnel Line has the potential to move more than 5,000 passengers per day if emissions-free trains are employed. Rail can use low-carbon sources of energy including overhead electrification supplemented by battery and/or diesel hybrid power. Emissions-free operations doubles the capacity of the Moffat Tunnel Line by eliminating the need to vent contaminated air in the 6.2 mile long Moffat Tunnel between trains. Bus connections radiating out as "branches" from that "Railroad Trunk Line" can serve many more communities including ski resorts, using the VelociRFTA service in the Roaring Fork Valley as an excellent model of what a successful bus branch service looks like in the Colorado high country.



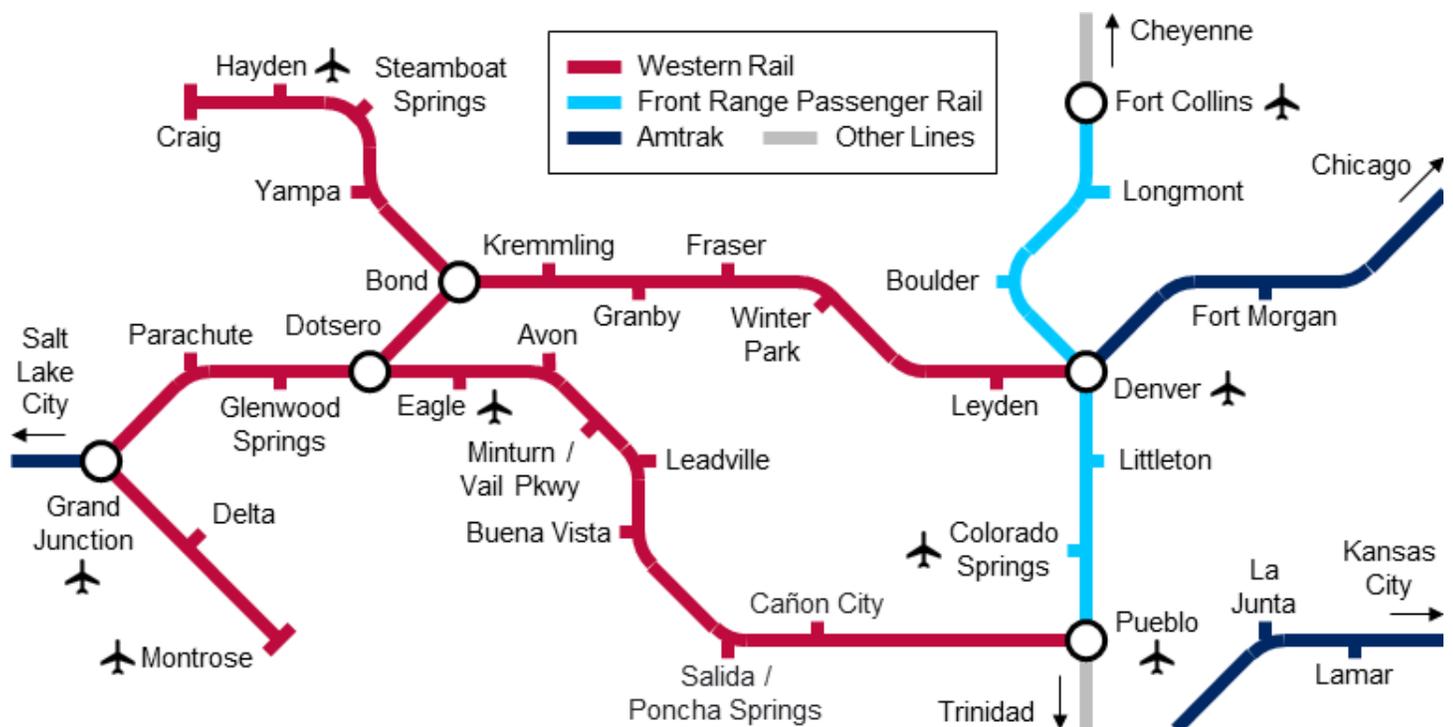
## A Bold Vision for Western Rail I-70 Traffic Relief and Alternative via Rail

I-70 driver safety can also be greatly enhanced by a semi-truck **Freight Traffic Bypass via a "Truck-on-Train Bridge"**. Such service will be capable of transporting up to 1,200 big rigs and drivers per day safely over the mountains in all weather conditions without driving through Glenwood Canyon, over Vail Pass, or down from the Eisenhower/Johnson Tunnel. In addition, reopening the Tennessee Pass line between Dotsero and Pueblo will make regular daily Truck-on-Train service possible, thus relieving the I-25 corridor as well.

Reopening of the portion of Tennessee Pass from Dotsero to Leadville will allow thousands of visitors and workers in the Eagle River Valley, including to Vail / Beaver Creek, access to safe and reliable transit. Longer-distance passenger service along the full Tennessee Pass line from Pueblo to Grand Junction via Salida, Buena Vista, and Leadville would open a new accessible and sustainable door to outdoor adventure in the state.

Maximizing the potential of rail with strategic bus connections can result in 50,000 passengers per day going to 55 destinations without adding any traffic to I-70 choke-points. Rail is the obvious option that increases capacity, improves safety, protects the environment, and can be implemented on an urgent timeline.

### Western Rail Map





## A Bold Vision for Western Rail I-70 Traffic Relief and Alternative via Rail

**CRUX:** The most vital part of realizing such a plan is gaining enough ownership over existing rights-of-way, which are currently owned by the Union Pacific Corporation. Achieving this will require powerful and focused leadership, new funding districts, and careful coordination across state & local government agencies. If Colorado's citizens hope to realize meaningful passenger rail west of the Front Range, they cannot be subject to UPRR dispatching and freight train delays.

Currently, the UPRR dispatches about 8-10 trains per day over the Moffat line. Even with this small number, they are unable to dispatch 2 Amtrak trains a day in a timely manner. More than half the runs of the California Zephyr arrived late so far in 2024. When the Winter Park Express ski train is counted into the mix, performance drops even further. How can Colorado hope that the UPRR will do any better with the addition of multiple state-sponsored passenger trains?

If the Colorado Rail Authority is created, and they have full control over the Moffat and Tennessee Pass lines, Colorado would take the lead in the clean-transportation revolution: rail use that will achieve the lofty goals set out by the Governor of Colorado in the 2024 State of the State speech.

Therefore, we call upon Colorado's Department of Transportation to focus on providing safe, reliable, frequent, and affordable public transportation to as many communities west of Denver as possible, and to ensure freight in the western half of Colorado is ecologically safe, and maximized to the greatest good of the people of the State.

### How to create a new Colorado Rail Authority (CRA)

A new Colorado Rail Authority (CRA) will be designed to identify and develop future rail corridors in the State of Colorado and work in harmony with the state Public Utilities Commission (PUC), FRA, and the various constituent transit agencies using one of two models:

1. **The "MBTA Model"** - the new rail authority is owned as a branch of the state DoT (CDOT). In Massachusetts, MassDOT owns their version of RTD Commuter Rail (MBTA) including the rails of the heavily-trafficked Northeast Corridor between Boston and the Rhode Island border where MBTA's commuter trains share track with intercity Amtrak trains. CDOT ownership would make it easier to integrate and expand intercity services if the CRA were entitled to a set percentage of annual agency capital expenditure (CAPEX) dollars, gradually phasing up from 5% to 20%. This would enforce the State's existing mandate for CDOT to expand beyond being just a highway owner and operator with the responsibility for constructing, operating, and expanding equitable and sustainable transit mobility statewide.
2. **The "Caltrain Model"** - alternatively, the CRA could be composed as a joint powers board that is appointed, administered and funded by the transit agencies along its route(s) such as RTD, Transfort, RFTA, and Mountain Metro. This requires more coordination, but should result in an organization that has a strong focus on rail.

By modeling rail service in Colorado off of successful passenger rail configurations, we can create an improved rail system for all Coloradans that is fast, efficient, and cost-effective.



# A Bold Vision for Western Rail I-70 Traffic Relief and Alternative via Rail

## The Future



With the Colorado Rail Authority established, the aforementioned existing rail purchased by the state, and passenger service established on existing rail routes (Phase 1), it will become more feasible to invest in stretches of new tracks to provide convenient rail connections from Denver (and Denver International Airport) directly to all major ski resorts and towns within Summit and Eagle Counties with speeds that can be competitive with driving (Phase 2). The Colorado Rail Authority gives CDOT the capability to complete the vision of long term congestion relief as set out in the I-70 Mountain Corridor Record of Decision/PEIS (Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement) and the I-70 AGS (Advanced Guideway Study).

Best Regards,

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