

Western Rail Coalition Letter - Eagle River Valley Service - **DRAFT**

Dear Governor Polis,

Colorado's Western Rail Coalition urges your support to expand CDOT's Mountain Rail concept to include frequent, quiet, and low-emission passenger rail service in the Eagle River Valley and Arkansas River Valley in the near term at a very economical cost.

Advocacy Context

While our coalition is 100% supportive of the existing Mountain Rail project between Denver and Craig, we believe that such a limited scope cannot be the extent of our state's short-term ambitions. These ambitions should include far more of the Western Slope and Arkansas River Valley. Our coalition has a grounded vision which can quickly tap into high-potential existing rail assets for the people of Colorado and its visitors.

Why prioritize the Eagle River Valley?

Today, there is a monumental but time-limited opportunity to work with private rail carriers who are equipped to and interested in supplying new local passenger rail service between Leadville and Glenwood Springs, what we are calling the Eagle River Valley service. Union Pacific's out-of-service Tennessee Pass Line (dormant since 1997) is currently leased to a passenger rail operator, Rio Grande Pacific Railroad, which is interested in running a local passenger service on the line with quiet, modern, and low-emission rail vehicles. However, their plan relies on support from CDOT and locals such as area municipalities to bring the line back for the benefit of the public; they may not renew their lease with the Union Pacific Railroad if support for passenger rail is not evident.

Where would trains run?:

This service will connect Leadville, Minturn, Avon/Beaver Creek, Edwards, Eagle, Eagle County Regional Airport, Gypsum, and potentially other Eagle Valley workforce communities such as Dotsero with hourly-or-better rail service to/from Glenwood Springs. The Beaver Creek Riverfront Gondola located immediately next to the existing tracks and Avon transit station enables a seamless connection between the rail, the incredibly popular ski slopes, as well as one of the valley's new busiest Core Transit Authority bus hubs. Additionally, linking the service to Glenwood Springs connects the Eagle River Valley/Tennessee Pass Line to the Roaring Fork Transit Authority and existing Amtrak services, thus providing a valuable alternative to the beleaguered, traffic-choked stretch of I-70 through Glenwood Canyon and Eagle County.

What are the benefits?

The Eagle River Valley Rail Service project promises strong ridership, greater visibility for a rail success story, and will go further for each state investment dollar than nearly any other near-term mobility project. This car-competitive option will connect the dense ski resort and airport destinations of the Eagle River Valley with key communities in the Arkansas River Valley. Many of these workers and skiers currently commute by car and are plagued with weather uncertainties and parking costs. This project will be the first step in connecting

Colorado's I-70 ski resort mecca with vastly more affordable housing and transit options. The economic benefits and success of this project will hopefully lead to expanded connections in Lake, Chaffee, Fremont, and Garfield counties.

Importance to State Interests

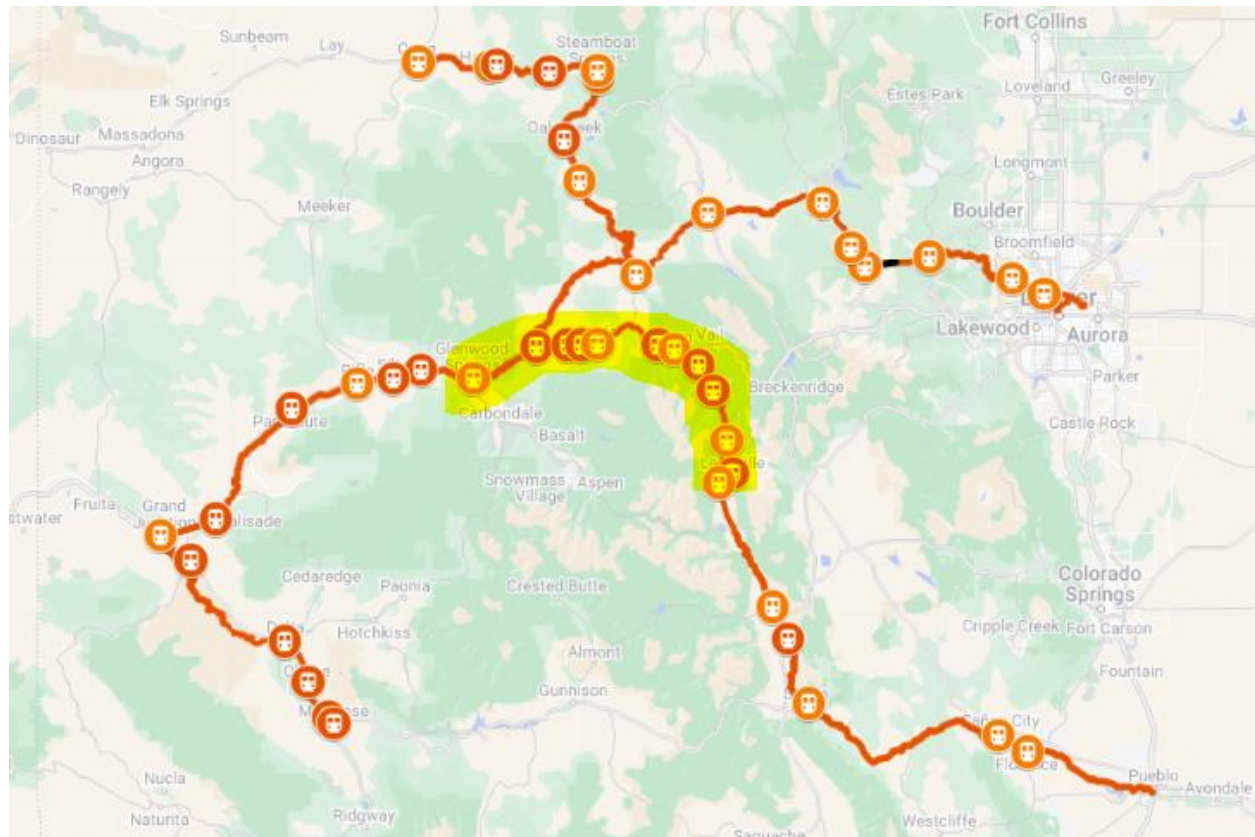
This will be the most visible and long-lasting rail win that could be attributed to your administration. Please direct CDOT to open a dialogue with the Rio Grande Pacific Railroad and to commence study in the form of a service development plan (SDP) that quantifies the actual project costs and benefits. It should be a core goal to secure the necessary funding and preparation to start construction activities within the next two years.

Sincerely,

Colorado's Western Rail Coalition

- Connor Roth, The Offgrid Urbanist
- James Flattum, Greater Denver Transit Co-Founder
- Richard Bamber, Greater Denver Transit Co-Founder
- Luke Sponable, Greater Denver Transit

Reference: **Western Rail Concept** (Eagle River Valley Service highlighted in Yellow)



Key: Western Rail's existing tracks are noted in orange. **Dark Orange stations** are contemplated as local/regional-only service and **light orange stations** are contemplated to host both local/regional and future longer-distance intercity passenger rail services.

Other/Q&A:

Will this project slow down or distract from Mountain Rail?

- No - this project will be complimentary of all Mountain Rail efforts, especially as much of the legwork may not need to be completed by CDOT/stage agencies.
- This is about collaborating with an existing passenger rail operator that already has a lease to the Tennessee Pass Line and is interested in operating a passenger service on this line.
- The line is intact, and for relatively modest capital investment, could be brought back into service for passenger operations that would benefit all residents.

How much will this project cost?

- The cost of the project will not be known with any precision until CDOT formally studies the line and delivers a Service Development Plan (SDP). While the 2014 CDOT Advanced Guideway System (AGS) feasibility study has planted a number in the minds of Coloradans that new mountain trains will cost 10's of billions of dollars, but this is not remotely the case to leverage existing rail.
- Based on back-of-the-napkin estimates outlining the known track work, signaling installation, and fleet procurement, the cost to install a Leadville to Glenwood Springs service will cost only a tiny fraction of that amount, something between \$200M and \$400M, which is no small amount of money abstractly, but very affordable in relative infrastructure terms that require state resources.
- SB-230 funds could well be attributed.
- We recommend exploring untapped accommodations tax revenue or other potential tourist based revenue streams to further fund this project.

What about oil trains?

- The return of oil trains to the Tennessee Pass Line is exceedingly unlikely, and new passenger services on the line would make the prospect for any through-freight return to the line even less likely.
- The Tennessee Pass Line has not been an economical route for the operations of oil trains or any other kind of through-freight trains for nearly 30 years due to punishingly-steep grades that are far more expensive for freight rail companies to operate over when other route options are available, and the line's owner has two other choices.

- The steep climb of the Minturn to Tennessee Pass grade and the duplication of routes available (created by the Union Pacific/Southern Pacific merger) was the primary reason Union Pacific (UP) decided to cease operations in 1997 over Tennessee Pass.
- However, these steep grades are much less of a hindrance for passenger trains which can operate with much lighter, quieter, and low-carbon-impact vehicles.
- Further, the lessee who could operate the passenger services on the line is contractually prohibited from running any through-freight trains of any kind.
- A commuter overlay from Glenwood Springs to Leadville would not make Tennessee Pass a functional through-route as many more miles would still remain out of service to the active network, at Parkdale near the Royal Gorge.
- In fact, filling the existing track's capacity with frequent and quiet passenger services could be a viable alternative use of the rail line as opposed to loud and polluting through-freight.
- Quiet, modern, and low-emission passenger services offer a much greater benefit to local residents and actually makes it harder for through-trains to ever return to the line.
- This is a unique opportunity for Colorado to create an exclusive passenger rail corridor that would not have to compete with inflexible through-freight service.
- Therefore providing the opportunity for car-free ski vacations and cheaper commuting options for workers and residents alike. When the Tennessee Pass returns as a passenger line, its stunning views of the Eagle and Arkansas River Valleys will secure its status as an international rail attraction in and of itself.