

Submitted as Public Comment to the RTD Special Board Meeting, May 28th, 2025

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Julian Bouquet, RTD Board Chair
Regional Transportation District
1660 Blake Street
Denver, CO 80202

Dear Chair Bouquet,

“Yes” on the Joint Service Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) for Northwest Rail

GDT urges a “yes” vote on the upcoming Joint Service motion to keep critical collaborative tasks between RTD and CDOT moving on Northwest Rail with confidence that further approval from the RTD Board will still be required when (a) costs are presented after the Joint Service study is complete and (b) a track access agreement with the line’s owner (the BNSF Railway) is on the table.

It is vital that RTD be seen as doing everything it possibly can to deliver on the promises of FasTracks, and at this stage, there is only one path on the table with new funding, and this involves a partnership with the State of Colorado, under whose authority RTD was created at the consent of voters.

Consequences and Lessons from the 2004 FasTracks Ballot Measure 4A

The 41-mile Northwest Rail Line connecting Denver to Boulder and Longmont was promised in the RTD FasTracks sales tax vote in 2004. The original plan was to pay BNSF, who owns the tracks from Westminster to Longmont via Boulder, to double-track and electrify the line with an overhead catenary system (OCS) to be compatible with RTD’s other heavy rail lines. While the double-tracking wasn’t such a big deal for a large Class I railroad, the electrification was asking BNSF to do something in which it had practically zero construction and operating experience, in return for no benefit to freight train operations - which would remain diesel powered.

The result was that the quoted costs to complete Northwest Rail ballooned from the \$461m original estimate in 2003 (before the FasTracks vote) to \$1.5bn in 2018. With polling showing that voters were unlikely to approve further sales tax increases, RTD projected that they wouldn’t have funds to complete the line until 2042 (now revised to 2044). These dates are clearly unpalatable for politicians and residents of Boulder and Longmont, who point out that their communities have now been paying their fair share of FasTracks sales taxes for twenty years with little progress on the rail line to show for it.

The mistake made over twenty years ago was to promise the voters a project with quoted costs and then have to walk that back after negotiations with BNSF revealed vastly differing figures. It is imperative that this mistake must not be repeated a second time.

These promises are remembered, the higher sales tax is felt, and the “Ghost Train” is almost inseparable from political discussions about RTD. Any appearance of shirking these promises will have grave political consequences for transit. There should be no doubt that the uncompleted FasTracks corridors, especially Northwest Rail to Boulder and Longmont, is weighing heavily on public confidence in RTD and transit generally. While it is critical that RTD return to a ridership growth trajectory, a trajectory which must be supported by multiple highly-needed capital projects in the future, we at GDT are convinced that RTD will be unsuccessful in raising any major new funds at the ballot until there is a clear path to deliver service on the corridors that were promised fast, frequent, reliable, and accessible rail services.

In recent years, RTD has shed the expertise in the form of headcount that would be needed to complete capital projects to deliver most of these corridors by itself, and so the State has stepped up to help push these projects toward the finish line, and this presents a unique opportunity for the agency.

Capital Investment Split

GDT proposes that RTD be responsible for half the construction costs after Federal grants (e.g. CRISI) are applied, of any infrastructure required for joint service between Denver and Longmont. In the event a Federal grant spans an area outside of the Denver - Longmont section, the grant amount applied should be proportional to the track miles or infrastructure otherwise funded.

Front Range Passenger Rail Full Buildout Considerations

A requirement for RTD to approve any infrastructure investment should be the presentation of a comprehensive incremental plan by the State of Colorado which details how the northwest corridor would be built out to a fully independent, double-track passenger rail right-of-way. Such a plan would guide infrastructure decisions and prevent costly mistakes where infrastructure is unable to be easily upgraded in the future.

While such thinking may seem unattainable in 2025, GDT cautions that a similar lack of an ambitious plan in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in key development decisions being mishandled at the old Stapleton Airport because no one anticipated tens of millions of passengers would want to fly in and out of Denver. The result was the costly provision of a new airport that is located in a far less convenient location relative to the city.

Operational Cost Split

It is anticipated that the Joint Service Executive Oversight Committee (JSEOC) will appoint an operator for the Northwest Corridor Joint Service.

GDT proposes that RTD be responsible for half the operational costs of any train miles operated between Denver and Longmont. In the event trains are operated beyond the limits of the joint service area, a proportion of operating costs divided in half relative to train miles operated inside the joint service area should be assessed. For ‘fixed’ operational costs such as train fleet maintenance, the same train miles formula should be used to assess RTD’s share of costs.

JSEOC Representation

GDT notes that RTD's membership of the JSEOC ensures the agency's input will be considered, however we have concerns that some decisions made on a '50% plus one' basis could result in RTD being severely outnumbered on a vote while ultimately being responsible for 40-50% of the financial consequences of said vote. We urge the agency to negotiate for a larger weighted share of the vote or a veto in such cases, to avoid a scenario where the other JSEOC members functionally have full control over allocation of RTD's funds.

GDT recommends that the RTD Board vote to appropriate funding with final approval conditional on costs agreed with BNSF and confirmation that the State of Colorado will fund their agreed share of the capital investment and operational costs for as long as the joint service agreement is in place.

Thanks for all you do,



James Flattum



Richard Bamber



Emma Griffin



Joe Meyer

CC: RTD Board of Directors
Debra Johnson, RTD General Manager & CEO
Angel Peña, RTD Deputy CEO