

DATE: May 8, 2020
TO: Transit and Rail Advisory Committee
FROM: Randy Grauberger, Project Director, SW Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission
SUBJECT: Update on the Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission

Purpose

The purpose of this memo is to provide updated information about the Rail Commission's activities since the last memo dated March 13, 2020.

Action

Information only, no action requested

Background

The SW Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission was created by SB 17-153 in 2017. There are 11 voting members of the Commission (MPOs, Class I Freight railroads, passenger rail advocates, local leaders) and three non-voting members (CDOT, Amtrak and Wyoming rep.). The Rail Commission has two purposes: 1) facilitate the development of passenger rail along the greater I-25 corridor, 2) ensure existing Amtrak Southwest Chief service remains in SE Colorado. An initial allocation of funding to the Commission (\$2.5 million) was provided by the Legislature in 2018 for staffing and initial stakeholder engagement, Pre-NEPA and service development planning.

Details

The Rail Commission held its most recent monthly meeting in remotely via ZOOM on April 24th. Meetings will continue to be held remotely until further notice. The next in-person meeting will be held in Pueblo. Meetings of the Commission occur on the 4th Friday of each month.

Work related to successful 2018 TIGER IX and CRISI grants continues. A Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant of \$9,157,600 was awarded for the design, installation and testing of positive train control (PTC) wayside technology on 179 miles of track between Dodge City, KS and Las Animas, CO. Sub agreements with the funding agencies are being developed and pre-award authority for BNSF to begin designing the system has been provided. Also, a TIGER IX Grant of \$16,000,000 was awarded for track upgrades to the Southwest Chief's route between Hutchinson, KS and Las Animas in addition to improvements to New Mexico's route carrying New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter service.

A kick-off meeting was held in early April with FRA related to the 2019 CRISI grant award for a "Southwest Chief Thru-car Service to Colorado Springs Feasibility Study". This \$450,000 Study will look at the feasibility of extending the existing Southwest Chief service from La Junta to Pueblo and from Pueblo to Colorado Springs. Matching funds for this study were provided by the Rail Commission, CDOT, Pueblo County, La Junta and ColoRail. Statement of Work, Schedule and Budget are being developed. There is a possibility that the grant could be obligated in July for this anticipated 15-month study.

It is unlikely that any Front Range Passenger Rail related legislation will be developed in this session of the Legislature due to the COVID-19 situation. Rail Commission members continue to work with

Congressional staff in regard to possible legislative language for future Stimulus or federal Fast Act Re-authorization funding for Rail Commission activities or SW Chief or Front Range Passenger Rail related projects. Commission Staff and Rail Commissioners continue to attempt to identify and secure other additional funding sources for the Commission and its activities. Funding for the Front Range Passenger Rail Consultant contract is anticipated to expire in the 4th quarter of CY 2020 and Commission Staff funding will be gone in mid-CY 2021.

The Commission has directed staff to apply for the next cycle of CRISI grant funding to do an EIS for Front Range Passenger Rail. That would be a "Track 2" project in the CRISI program (NEPA and design work). The sources of the required minimum 20% match for such an application have yet to be determined.

Round 3 of Segment Stakeholder Segment Coalition meetings were held for the Service Development Plan and pre-NEPA work of the Front Range Consultant Team. These meetings were held remotely on:

- North Segment – April 28
- Central Segment – April 29
- South Segment – April 30

A second Corridor Coalition meeting has yet to be scheduled but it could possibly take place in late May or June.

Individual stakeholder interviews gauging interest and issues related to Front Ranger Passenger Rail (approximately 30 along the Front Range) are being finalized with remaining interviews being scheduled with DEN, E-470 and Colorado Motor Carriers.

The Project Vision for the Front Range Passenger rail project is:

Developing passenger rail service that serves Front Range communities from Pueblo to Fort Collins is a critical component of Colorado's future. Front Range Passenger Rail (FRPR) will provide a safe, efficient, and reliable transportation option for travel between major population centers along the Front Range and create a backbone for connecting and expanding rail and transit options in the state and region.

The Commission's federal partners in the project (FRA, FHWA, and FTA) have indicated that this Vision will provide a foundation for the eventual Purpose and Need as project proceeds into NEPA near the end of this calendar year. A third meeting of the Project team and the three federal partners was held on April 2.

The Project team has been working with CDOT's modeling staff to evaluate preliminary model runs for Front Range Passenger Rail ridership. Preliminary results show rail ridership to be higher than Expanded Bustang (best bus) ridership, and also compares favorably with other passenger rail services in various locations in the U. S.