

FRPR

**FRONT RANGE
PASSENGER
RAIL**



***SOUTHWEST CHIEF & FRONT RANGE
PASSENGER RAIL COMMISSION
CLOSEOUT & TRANSITION REPORT***

FEBRUARY 2020



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RAIL COMMISSION
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CDOT	Colorado Department of Transportation
ColoRail	Colorado Rail Passenger Association
CRISI	Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements Program
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
FRA	Federal Railroad Administration
FRPR	Front Range Passenger Rail
GHG	Greenhouse gas
HB	House Bill
I-25	Interstate 25
KDOT	Kansas Department of Transportation
MOU	Memoranda of Understanding
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFRMPO	North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization
Rail Commission	Southwest Chief and Front Range Passenger Rail Commission
RAISE	Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity
RTC	Rail Traffic Controller
RTD	Regional Transportation District
SB	Senate Bill
TIGER	Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For the past 15 years, a dedicated group of rail advocates and municipal leaders advanced an ambitious idea to expand passenger rail service in Colorado. What began as an initiative championed by mostly small town city managers and officials in southern Colorado and New Mexico to “Save the Southwest Chief” has blossomed into a vision for passenger rail as a critical component of Colorado’s future. The concept of a “safe, efficient, and reliable transportation option for travel between major population centers and destinations along the Front Range and...backbone for connecting and expanding rail and transit options in the state and region” has widespread support in Colorado and growing national attention and backing.

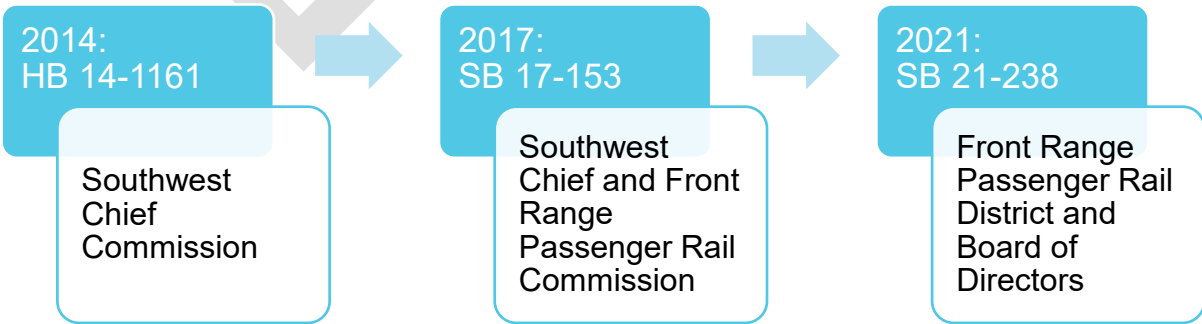
The next iteration of Front Range Passenger Rail (FRPR) will be transformative and provide significant transportation, economic, social, and environmental benefits to Colorado and beyond. This report describes the origins and future of FRPR from the perspective of the Southwest Chief and Front Range Passenger Rail (FRPR) Commission (called the “Rail Commission” in this report) leaders. It also outlines recommendations from the Rail Commissioners as the FRPR project enters into its next phase under the newly formed FRPR District Board of Directors, the governing body of the new FRPR District established by Colorado Senate Bill (SB) 21-238.

1.1 RAIL COMMISSION ORIGINS

The Rail Commission originated from the Southwest Chief Commission, which operated from 2014 to 2017 with the purpose of preserving Amtrak’s Southwest Chief passenger rail service through Colorado. The Southwest Chief runs on BNSF Railway tracks through much of Colorado and has stops in Lamar, La Junta, and Trinidad. The Southwest Chief is an important transportation route for local Colorado residents and provides tourism revenue to the communities it serves.

In 2014, Amtrak, faced with expiring contracts with BNSF and aging rail lines that needed costly repairs, proposed a new alternative for the Southwest Chief’s route that bypassed Colorado altogether with a more southern route through Oklahoma, Texas, and Southern New Mexico. In response, the Colorado General Assembly passed House Bill (HB) 14-1161, establishing the Southwest Chief Commission to oversee the Southwest Chief Rail Line Economic Development, Rural Tourism, and Infrastructure Repair and Maintenance Fund (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Colorado Passenger Rail Legislation, Associated Oversight, and Directing Entities



The seven-member Southwest Chief Commission was created to preserve Amtrak's Southwest Chief service on its route through Colorado and to pursue a potential stop in Pueblo. The commission was set to sunset after three years.

The Southwest Chief Commission secured grants from the federal Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) discretionary grant program, along with funding from the State of Colorado and the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), to repair portions of the BNSF rail line. Financial support was also received from local communities and the Colorado Rail Passenger Association (ColoRail), a rail advocacy group in the state. Doing so came with the promise that Amtrak would continue to service the Southern Colorado stops for the next 20 years.

After the most immediate needs were funded, the commission turned its attention towards connecting the Southwest Chief line with Pueblo and planning for future FRPR service along Colorado's Interstate 25 (I-25) corridor.

1.2 RAIL COMMISSION ESTABLISHMENT AND PURPOSE

In 2017, the Colorado General Assembly passed the bipartisan SB 17-153 to establish a newly expanded Rail Commission (see Figure 1). The new commission would continue to oversee the preservation and expansion of Amtrak's Southwest Chief rail services and would also facilitate the development and operation of the FRPR system along the I-25 corridor between Fort Collins and Pueblo.

The new Rail Commission consisted of eleven voting members representing local and regional governments and rail interests, including representation from Front Range communities and metropolitan organizations, Class I railroads, and the Regional Transportation District (RTD). CDOT, Amtrak, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, were non-voting members of the Rail Commission.

Unlike the Southwest Chief Commission, the new Rail Commission did not have any sunset provisions. During its operation from 2017 to 2022, the Rail Commission obtained funding and oversaw efforts to preserve the Southwest Chief rail service in Colorado and to advance planning for an FRPR system. The Commission's accomplishments are described in Section 2 of this report.

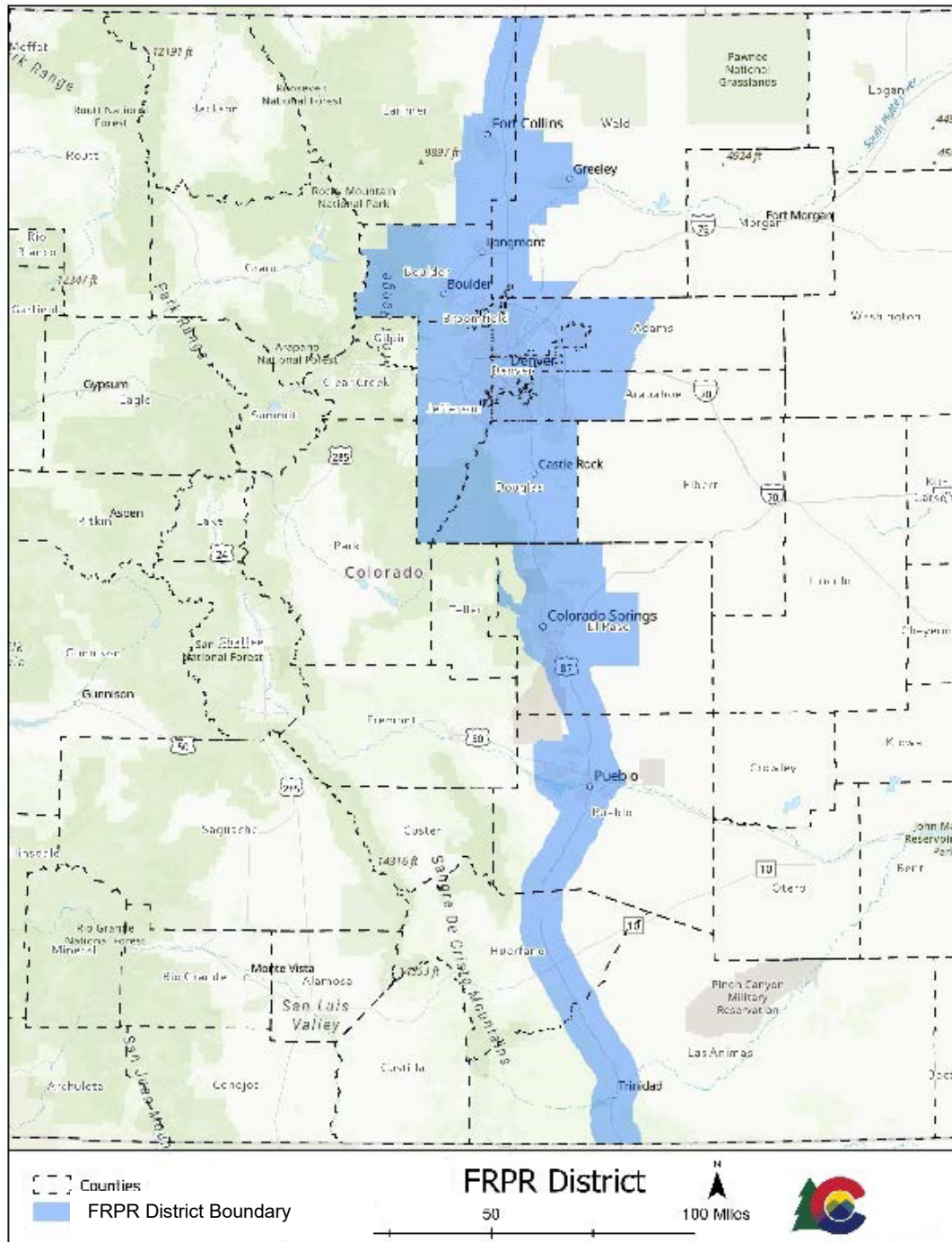
Rail Commission leadership and staff have provided annual updates to various state legislative groups. This includes annual briefings to the Joint Budget Committee as well as the Joint Transportation SMART Act Hearings. These have provided legislators with the opportunity to ask questions and gather information on FRPR project status.

1.3 FRPR DISTRICT ESTABLISHMENT AND PURPOSE

The Colorado legislature passed the FRPR District Act (SB 21-238) in 2021 (see Figure 1), establishing a district that covers all or parts of 13 counties near I-25 between Wyoming and New Mexico (Figure 2). The new FRPR District has the authority to levy taxes, through ballot measures, to fund and support rail programs, including establishing station area improvement districts to construct and maintain the necessary train stations to support the proposed FRPR system and a potential Southwest Chief spur to Pueblo.

SB 21-238 created the FRPR District Board of Directors to oversee the FRPR District. The 17-member Board will replace the Rail Commission and further its responsibilities and powers to govern and maintain an FRPR system and continue the pursuit of connecting Amtrak's Southwest Chief line with a southern FRPR connection. The Board includes non-voting members representing the railroads, RTD, and the I-70 Coalition.

Figure 2: FRPR District Boundary



2.0 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During its operation from 2017 to 2021, the Rail Commission secured important state and federal funding to further its mission (Section 2.1), conducted an analysis of alignment and operational alternatives for an FRPR system (Section 2.2), engaged with the public (Section 2.3), entered agreements with CDOT and RTD (Section 2.4), and conducted national advocacy efforts (Section 2.5). Local agencies have also conducted planning efforts that relate to and will support the implementation of an FRPR system (Section 2.6).

2.1 STATE AND FEDERAL FUNDING PROCUREMENT

The Rail Commission secured funding from the Colorado state legislature and from three Federal grant programs: the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program, the TIGER program, and the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program. Table 1 summarizes the funding sources related to the Southwest Chief, and Table 2 summarizes the funding sources related to FRPR. Appendix A contains materials related to grant funding, including Federal and non-Federal matching fund totals.

Table 1: State and Federal Passenger Rail Funding Sources for Southwest Chief Passenger Rail

Funding Source	Purpose	Status	Funding Amount
2018 CRISI Grant and matching funds from Rail Commission, CDOT, Kansas DOT (KDOT), and Amtrak	Implement safety improvements to Southwest Chief line between Dodge City, Kansas and Las Animas, Colorado. Rail line upgraded with improved safety measures to match national standards, including installation of Interoperable Electronic Train Management System technology and implementation of Positive Train Control.	Completion anticipated in 2022	\$11,447,000
2019 CRISI Grant and matching funds from Rail Commission, CDOT, Pueblo County, La Junta, and Colorado Rail Passenger Association (ColoRail)	Evaluate through-car service connecting Southwest Chief line to Pueblo and Colorado Springs, including coordination with Pueblo and Colorado Springs train station analyses.	Completion anticipated in 2022	\$450,000
TIGER Grant and matching funds from BNSF, Amtrak, Kansas, Colorado, and local communities	Improve approximately 20 miles of the Southwest Chief rail line rail line in Colorado, including replacement of 4 turnouts and 19 highway/railroad grade crossings.	In process	\$19,041,485

Funding Source	Purpose	Status	Funding Amount
RAISE Grant and matching funds from Rail Commission, CDOT, KDOT, Kansas, Colorado, Amtrak, BNSF, and local communities and counties	Improve the remaining 34 miles of unrehabilitated BNSF track on the Southwest Chief line.	Not yet started	\$23,412,150

Table 2: State and Federal Passenger Rail Funding Sources for FRPR

Funding Source	Purpose	Status	Funding Amount
SB 17-153	Hire Rail Commission staff and conduct pre-National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Alternatives Analysis for FRPR. The Alternatives Analysis developed FRPR alignment and operational alternatives and implementation strategies.	Pre-NEPA Alternatives Analysis completed in 2020	\$2,500,000
2020 CRISI Grant with matching funds from Rail Commission, CDOT, Colorado Rail Passenger Association (ColoRail) and local communities.	Conduct Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) approved preliminary service development plan and alternatives analysis for the FRPR starter service, building on the prior FRPR Alternatives Analysis.	Will begin in 2022	\$3,925,000

2.2 FRPR PROJECT ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

The Rail Commission, using funds from SB 17-153, completed a pre-NEPA Alternatives Analysis for FRPR in 2020. The goal was to develop viable alternatives for a long term, independent passenger rail service along the Front Range from Fort Collins to Pueblo that could provide a backbone for regional transportation, ease highway traffic congestion, and assist the state with reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The Alternatives Analysis evaluated existing transportation corridors for passenger rail service to the major population centers along the Front Range. The evaluation used a two-stage approach to identify reasonable alternatives for the FRPR alignment:

- Level 1 analysis eliminated alternatives with any “fatal flaws,” using high-level analysis. Fatal flaw analysis included considerations of whether the passenger rail alignment could serve major population centers based on 2040 population projections, the alternative’s ability to connect with other regional transportation options, the level of community disruption and environmental impacts, and the financial, economic, and political viability of the alignment.

- Level 2 analysis focused on more detailed considerations for comparisons among the remaining alternatives.

The report can be reviewed online at frontrangepassengerrail.com.

Five “build” alternatives and one enhanced “No Action” alternative were considered in the Level 1 evaluation:

- Consolidated Mainline + Union Pacific/Great Western Rail Corridor
- BNSF Rail Corridor
- BNSF + North I-25 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Commuter Rail Corridor
- I-25 + RTD Southeast Corridor
- I-25 + E-470 Highway Corridor
- Best Bus Enhanced No-Action Alternative

Two build alternatives were eliminated from consideration due to fatal flaws:

- The Consolidated Mainline + Union Pacific/Great Western Rail would bypass densely populated areas in North Denver while providing few opportunities to connect with existing and planned transit on the west side of I-25.
- The I-25 + RTD Southeast Corridor would substantially disrupt densely populated areas, causing severe community impacts that would make construction infeasible. The FRPR operations were also incompatible with the existing RTD service in the area.

The three remaining build alternatives were advanced to Level 2 analysis, along with the enhanced No-Action alternative, which was retained as a baseline for comparison against the build alternatives. After Level 2 evaluation, the Rail Commission recommended all three remaining build alternatives be carried forward into the NEPA phase, with certain refinements that can help address some of the issues discovered in the analysis. (See Figure 2.)

- The BNSF Freight Rail Corridor Alternative is recommended for further evaluation during NEPA because it best meets the purpose and need; is easier to phase with shorter independently useful segments; and presents the best opportunity for partnerships and complementary services among the Class I railroads, RTD, and Amtrak.
- The I-25 + E-470 Highway Corridor Alternative is recommended for further evaluation during NEPA because it presents options for use of CDOT right-of-way and can leverage CDOT’s investment in Bustang and I-25 mobility hubs if railroad right-of-way is not feasible or agreements cannot be negotiated. This alternative also has high ridership but would be harder to phase and does not serve high-demand central Denver destinations, residents, and jobs. Outside of Denver, the I-25 corridor presents opportunities for smart growth land use planning in developing communities growing toward I-25.
- The BNSF + North I-25 EIS Commuter Rail Corridor Alternative is also recommended for further evaluation during NEPA. Although it has lower ridership than the BNSF Freight Rail Corridor Alternative, primarily because the Louisville-Boulder-Longmont market is not served, it has some support and potential for optimization with RTD’s N Line. Ridership may be affected by slower operating speed from Denver Union Station.

The Alternatives Analysis also considered governance options for the FRPR program: a Public Rail Authority, a FRPR Authority, a Rail Transportation Enterprise, expanded authority for the current Rail Commission, and a combination of elements from the Public Rail Authority and the

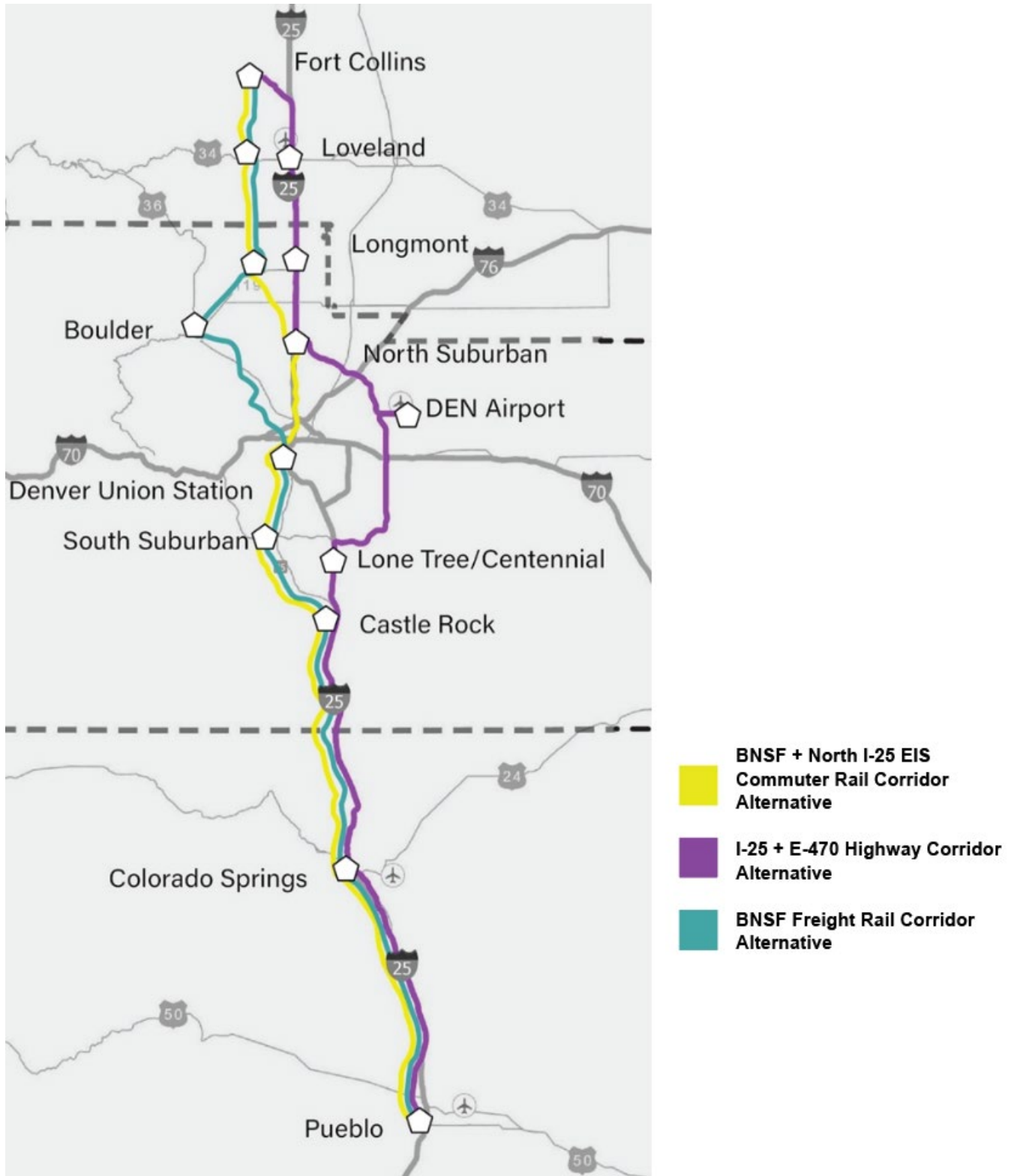
FRPR Authority. These options and recommendations laid the groundwork for SB 21-238, which established the FRPR District to carry out the governance, management, construction, and operation of the FRPR system. The FRPR District includes a vision for a system traversing the Colorado north-south border from Trinidad to Cheyenne. Though specific routes south of Pueblo and north of Fort Collins were not considered as part of the Alternatives Analysis effort, the Commission envisioned and advocated for extending service across the state.

Ultimately, the Alternatives Analysis showed that FRPR is technically feasible and can be implemented using existing transportation corridors, with overwhelming public support. To further execute the goals of project, a phased approach was recommended whereby commuter trains could operate alongside freight operations, which would decrease the initial investment capital needed to launch FRPR service.

The Level 2 alternatives were developed based on a robust operating plan of 24 end-to-end (Fort Collins to Pueblo) round trips per day. The Class I railroads, who participated as part of this study through the Rail Commission, have suggested that this aggressive service plan is not likely needed for an “opening day” service. They advised that with reduced headways, it might be possible for FRPR to operate alongside freight operations with a much smaller investment than a full double-track build out. This initial phase, in the \$2 billion to \$6 billion range, could provide an incremental path to the ultimate vision, and the Rail Commission is currently evaluating these options.

The Rail Commission applied for and received a CRISI program grant in 2020 to conduct rail simulation modeling, as noted in Section 2.1 of this report. In close coordination with FRA, host railroads, and Amtrak, the scope has been broadened to a preliminary service development plan. This will include an operational analysis with modeling projections that further refine ridership projections, cost estimates, and engineering designs and speed profiles.

Figure 3: FRPR Alignment Alternatives Advanced for Further Study



2.3 PUBLIC INPUT

During the development of the FRPR Alternatives Analysis, the Rail Commission developed stakeholder coalitions of transportation, community, and economic leaders by geography: north, central, and south. Numerous meetings were conducted with these coalitions where they provided input on the vision, alternatives, and future steps for developing FRPR. The Rail Commission also developed and hosted a project website (www.frontrangepassengerrail.com) to relay information about the project and solicit public input. As part of the public engagement process, the Rail Commission sponsored two online surveys and hosted an online public meeting to gauge awareness and interest in FRPR and seek ideas about how to implement the FRPR project.

2.3.1 ONLINE PUBLIC SURVEY (JULY – SEPTEMBER 2019)

The first online public survey was conducted from July through September 2019 and aimed to provide a benchmark of the public's awareness of the FRPR effort, and to better understand travel interests for the FRPR. Nearly 7,000 people completed the survey. Participants were self-selected, meaning that anyone with interest could complete the survey, although it was not statistically representative of Front Range residents.

Over half of the respondents already used public transit and nearly all (95 percent) supported FRPR for its opportunity to help solve congestion and environmental concerns. Most (92 percent) of the respondents reported interest in using FRPR if it were available.

95% of respondents support FRPR to help traffic congestion and environmental concerns, and 92% of respondents would use FRPR if it were available.

In a section that allowed participants to drag and drop pins onto a map to show where their trips on FRPR would begin and end, it was found that most participants would use passenger rail between Colorado Springs, Denver, and Fort Collins. However, this data showed that people are also interested in starting or ending their journeys at locations that are not directly along the path of the proposed rail service. Therefore, connecting local transit and providing park and rides will be necessary to reach these areas.

The top priority reasons for respondents to use FRPR were (in descending order): tourism / recreation, personal / shopping, and business. Benefits ranked as most important in the survey included (in descending order): improved air quality, reliable travel times, expanded travel choices, increased safety, connections to existing services, and economic development. In a 2021 survey recently issued to Rail Commissioners, the benefits they ranked as most important also included alternative travel options, reliability, and safety.

Overall, the survey was successful in its goal to assess public knowledge of the FRPR Project and to get an idea of people's travel interests, and it influenced the criteria used to evaluate FRPR alternatives during the pre-NEPA planning process. Data from this survey may be used to help new FRPR District Board members

Top ranked FRPR benefits were improved air quality, reliable travel times, and expanded travel choices.

prioritize the benefits of FRPR based on public ideals. Appendix B provides a detailed summary of the survey results.

2.3.2 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY (OCTOBER 2019)

In October 2018, the Rail Commission conducted a statistically significant sample of likely voters across 13 Front Range counties to gauge willingness of Front Range residents to FRPR as both a concept and a funding priority. This public opinion survey is considered representative

85% of respondents support FRPR and 60% support a sales tax increase to fund FRPR.

of Front Range voters, with a sample size of 600 and a margin of error of +/- 5 percent. For this survey, 85 percent of respondents expressed support for passenger rail as a mode of transportation for residents and communities along the Front Range, and about 60 percent supported a sales tax increase to fund the system, with similar support in the north, central, and southern regions.

The results of this survey were used to measure the support of Front Range residents for passenger rail services. While it did not use any language such as “vote for” or “vote against” or ask any specific ballot questions related to FRPR, it did give a good gauge of potential voter support for the concept of passenger rail and the general costs of those services. This information could help the new FRPR District Board in decision-making when it comes time to draft the ballot. Appendix C provides a detailed summary of the survey results.

2.3.3 ONLINE PUBLIC MEETING (2020)

In July 2020, an online public meeting was held to share background information on FRPR project, involve and update the public on the project and its current status, and ask participants to provide their feedback through interactive comment maps, surveys, and/or comment forms. More than 8,000 web users visited the online meeting, and many (nearly 2,000) visited more than once, indicating sustained interest in FRPR.

Affordability, access to stations, and reasonable travel times were top priorities identified in the public meeting survey.

Some general themes came up consistently in the survey and include the following priorities: affordability (both for potential users and throughout project development); rail and station accessibility within communities along the Front Range; reasonable travel times; and construction costs and funding. Locations that participants most wanted to have easy access to via the passenger rail system were: Downtown Denver (60 percent), Denver International Airport (32 percent), and the Denver Tech Center (8 percent).

Input gathered from the public survey was taken into consideration by the Rail Commission to ensure that they have kept public concerns and preferences at the forefront of the project’s mission moving forward. It may also give insight into some topics that may need to be further

discussed or publicly communicated. Appendix D provides a detailed summary of the meeting input.

2.4 AGREEMENTS WITH CDOT AND RTD

The Commission worked closely with CDOT to secure funding and to accomplish the Commission’s goals to pursue politically viable rail service along the Front Range and to connect Amtrak’s Southwest Chief with the new Front Range rail line. To this end, the Commission and CDOT have entered several Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) to achieve their stated goals. Table 3 summarizes the MOUs, and Appendix E contains copies of the MOUs.

Table 3: Rail Commission Agreements with CDOT and RTD

MOU Parties	Purpose	Date
Rail Commission, CDOT	CDOT committed to provide staffing assistance to the Rail Commission during the pre-NEPA Alternatives Analysis	2020
Rail Commission, CDOT	CDOT committed to provide additional staffing and technical assistance to the Rail Commission to support continued pre-NEPA planning	2021 (superseded 2020 MOU)
Rail Commission, CDOT, RTD	All parties committed to working together to complete studies to develop a shared vision for passenger rail on RTD’s FasTracks Northwest Rail alignment	2021

2.5 NATIONAL ADVOCACY EFFORTS

The Rail Commission also conducted national advocacy efforts, presenting information about Colorado’s passenger rail planning efforts to the following groups:

- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials Council on Rail Transportation Annual Meetings (2020 and 2021)
- States for Passenger Rail Coalition Quarterly Meetings (2020 and 2021)
- Rail Passengers Association Annual Meeting (2020 and 2021)
- Testimony to the Senate Commerce Committee hearing on National Passenger Rail (2019)
- Colorado Congressional delegation (ongoing outreach)

The Rail Commission’s ongoing conversations with Amtrak have resulted in Amtrak identifying Colorado as one of their four priority corridors for new development, along with Texas, Ohio, and Florida.

2.6 RELATED LOCAL AND REGIONAL PLANS

Through the FRPR alternatives analysis process, the Front Range metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) worked with CDOT and the Transportation Commission to formally include FRPR in long-range plans. Additionally, local and regional agencies have furthered rail and transit elements in their transportation plans that will support or provide connections with the proposed FRPR system, like local rail station planning (see Figure 4). Some of these include:

LINKNoCo. The North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization (NFRMPO) is working to expand their 2045 Regional Transit Element plan to provide a complete network of regional transit connections among North Front Range communities. LINKNoCo builds off both the NFRMPO 2045 Regional Transit Element and the FRPR Project Alternatives Analysis and aims to identify the most promising transit corridors for a regional network that will connect communities and connect with FRPR. The full LINKNoCo plan is expected to be released in the summer of 2022. Currently, NFRMPO is in the analysis and prioritization phase of planning, after releasing their draft report for public comment in the summer of 2021 (North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization, n.d.) and conducting another round of public surveys to identify potential transit corridors in the fall of 2021.

Pueblo Rail Station. Voters in Pueblo County approved the 1A Community Improvement Program in 2016, which included funding efforts to expand the Southwest Chief line to Pueblo. The first step to connecting Pueblo with the Southwest Chief line was to identify potential train station sites. Over the course of a one-year planning process, the project team conducted three public meetings, three public surveys, and held dozens of meetings with core stakeholders. With over 300 individual surveys conducted, the project team released their Pueblo Station Plan report in 2020, which establishes a preferred station at the Union Station Depot (Pueblo County, 2020).

Colorado Springs Rail Station. Colorado Springs recently secured grant funding to identify potential station development in Colorado Springs. This study is in anticipation of the FRPR project, though the station could service a through-car from La Junta to Colorado Springs in connection with the 2019 CRISI Grant Alternatives Analysis being conducted. The Colorado Springs station development report is expected to kick off in early 2022.

ConnectCOS. Colorado Springs has also launched a citywide transportation study to help create a transportation plan for future growth. ConnectCOS builds off the planning goals of PlanCOS, the City's Comprehensive Plan and guiding document, by focusing on regional transportation goals. ConnectCOS has conducted its first round of surveying, and those findings were released in the summer of 2021.

Northwest Rail. The Northwest Rail commuter line remains an unfunded component of RTD's FasTracks program, which was approved by voters in 2004. The commuter rail line will follow the BNSF freight rail corridor from Denver to Boulder and on to Longmont. Six miles of the line are currently operating between Denver and Westminster, and the remaining 35 miles of the line remain incomplete. RTD is exploring potential partnerships with Amtrak and the new FRPR District to prioritize initiation of construction and completion of the Northwest Rail corridor. Parallel to the FRPR effort, RTD is moving forward with a study to analyze details of implementing peak service on the rail line, in coordination with communities and stakeholders.

Figure 4: Rail and Transit Efforts Supporting FRPR Development



3.0 FINANCIAL REPORT

This section describes how the Rail Commission received funding and how it decided to prioritize the use of those funds.

The Colorado state legislature initially provided funds following the passage of SB 17-153, which established the Rail Commission to oversee the preservation and expansion of Amtrak

Southwest Chief passenger rail service in Colorado and facilitate the development and operation of a FRPR system that provides passenger rail service in and along the I-25 corridor. The Colorado state legislature provided \$2.5 million to the Rail Commission in SB 18-001. In subsequent years, appropriations were provided to ensure this original funding remained available.

With the original \$2.5 million, the Rail Commission advanced its mission with appropriate focus. This included hiring two full-time staffers to oversee Commission activities (approximately \$500,000) for three years. The Rail Commission also contracted a consulting team to complete the initial Alternatives Analysis (\$1.5 million). Additional expenses included contracting consultants for public surveys (\$25,000), national advocacy membership dues (\$15,000), website and contact database management software (\$650), and a final report contract (\$25,000).

Without a dedicated funding stream, the Rail Commission looked to creative methods to ensure continued funding. The ability to keep technical project work moving forward was of utmost importance.

The Rail Commission received three CRISI grants from the FRA, described in Section 2.1 of this report. The 2018 CRISI grant (\$11,447,000) funded the installation of Positive Train Control along the Southwest Chief line. The 2019 CRISI Grant (\$450,000) was awarded to study the potential for Southwest Chief Thru-Car service to Pueblo and Colorado Springs. The 2020 CRISI grant (\$548,000 of federal funding with \$3,377,000 of matching funds) will be used to fund the FRPR Service Development Plan, an FRA-necessitated step to implement new passenger rail service. In total, the Rail Commission has provided \$1,785,000 in matching funds to bring nearly \$10 million in federal investments. The southern communities of La Junta, Trinidad, and Pueblo were instrumental in financially supporting grants. Additionally, CDOT and the Colorado Transportation Commission dedicated significant matching resources, largely in the form of dedicated staff, to the effort. The Rail Commission, along with its partners, has been able to demonstrate community support for passenger rail throughout the region. With this strategy, the necessary technical work has been able to continue successfully. The federal grant model of funding, while not a dedicated funding stream, offers a method for the FRPR to stay in the national spotlight while ensuring project success.

The successful CRISI Grants built upon the work of the predecessor to the Rail Commission, the disbanded Southwest Chief Commission. The Southwest Chief Commission targeted the TIGER grant program with great success. Successful grants included TIGER VI (\$21.77 million), TIGER VII (\$24.44 million), and TIGER IX (\$25.19 million). With these investments, the Southwest Chief has been able to maintain service to rural Coloradan communities, and the Rail Commission was able to establish precedent in utilizing limited local funding to encourage federal investments in passenger rail.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The FRPR Project Alternatives Analysis (see Section 2.2) provided long term rail alignment and operations recommendations that will inform the upcoming service development plan for a starter service being conducted in 2022. In addition to these technical recommendations, Rail Commission staff administered an online survey and conducted one-on-one interviews with Rail Commissioners in November 2021 to gather their thoughts on their time serving on the Rail Commission, their challenges, and their recommendations for the future FRPR District Board.

The following sections describe the information they provided to help guide the FRPR District Board in advancing FRPR in Colorado, related to the following topics:

- Communications: Board member roles and meeting format
- Public engagement goals
- Service and operating plan considerations
- Financing considerations: financial plan and tax ballot measure

Appendix F provides the results of the online survey, and Appendix G contains a more detailed summary of Commissioners' recommendations and notes from the Commissioners' individual interviews.

4.1 COMMUNICATIONS

The Rail Commission comprises 11 voting members, representing local and regional governments and rail interests, including both Class I railroads and RTD. Representatives from CDOT, Amtrak, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, are non-voting members of the Rail Commission. The Rail Commission met once a month; meetings were open to the public and included structured periods for public comment, staff reports, funding and CRISI grant updates for the Southwest Chief and FRPR, and a period for any other important items to be discussed, which often included updates on Amtrak and state and federal legislative efforts.

Rail Commissioners provided their thoughts on the mix of Commissioner backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, and Rail Commission meeting format, which may be helpful in establishing protocols for FRPR District Board meetings.

4.1.1 BOARD MEMBER ROLES

Commissioners had the following key recommendations related to Board member roles and communications:

- Communication protocols should be established and consistently followed so that all Board members are aware of other Board members' external conversations with stakeholders.
- Carefully consider the mix of agency staff, elected officials, and private rail advocates on the Board.
 - Elected officials are able to participate in decision-making more effectively than agency staff, who need to discuss topics with their agencies before taking a position on an issue. Elected officials can also lobby for FRPR in ways that agency staff cannot.
 - Agency staff have expertise with technical topics, planning procedures, and key stakeholders that elected officials often don't have.
- The Board needs members who are experienced with the federal project development process and well-educated on passenger rail.

Carefully consider the mix of elected officials, agency staff, and private rail advocates on the Board

- Board members have a responsibility to think beyond their jurisdiction and focus on developing the best project for Colorado. This will be especially important as the system is refined and benefits are communicated to voters and federal funding partners.

4.1.2 BOARD MEETING FORMAT

Commissioners had the following thoughts on meeting format:

- Monthly meetings are ideal.
- Meetings should be structured to maximize time for discussion of decisions and recommendations. Suggestions for maximizing this time include:
 - Emailing member report-outs ahead of time so report-outs don't need to occur at the meeting.
 - Establish an executive committee that makes recommendations for the Board to approve.
- Structure meetings to solicit input from all Board members, not just those who are most vocal.
- Provide a structured section of the meeting for public comment, as more stakeholders may wish to provide comment as the FRPR project develops.
- Presentations generate better interaction and more questions when they are short.
- In-person meetings helped create relationships among Rail Commissioners, but travel time was difficult for meetings held across the Front Range. Virtual meetings were more efficient and had better turnout, but relationships were not as easy to create and maintain.
- Consider a transition meeting between the Rail Commission and the new FRPR District Board to provide an opportunity for networking and advice.

Maximize discussion time for better decision-making and recommendations

4.2 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT GOALS

Commissioners ranked public engagement as the top priority for advancing FRPR and had the following recommendations for working with the public:

- If you represent an area, communicate with and educate your region. Publicizing information to raise awareness and listening to community and stakeholder groups are key parts of the position.
- A clear protocol for project communications with the public, elected officials, and agency staff should be developed:
 - Organize the Board's talking points and communication efforts
 - Create a budget, plan, and schedule for outreach
 - Tailor discussions to individual regions to focus on how the FRPR project will benefit them specifically

- Public communications should focus on both direct benefits of rail—for example, reliability, safety, and amenities like comfort and Wi-Fi service, that you don't get when stuck in traffic congestion—and indirect benefits of rail, like assisting the launch of associated local transit services.
- Don't set unrealistic expectations about FRPR costs and timeframes; it's important to be honest about the program costs and the implementation timeframe, which is at least ten years away.
- Take the time to fully understand all the information and details about the FRPR project; when the public have questions, the Board needs to have accurate answers.

Educate constituents on rail's benefits and set realistic expectations about FRPR costs and timeframes.

4.3 SERVICE AND OPERATING PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

Commissioners noted key components of the service and operation plan they felt were important to include:

- First and foremost, a preferred route alignment for FRPR.
- Station location and equipment type.
- Considerations for connecting affordable housing and employment centers.
- Inclusion of attributes people want and convenience for both commuters and those travelling for entertainment.
- Service that complements and connects effectively with the existing RTD system and other local transit systems.
- Identification of initial phasing that is fast, reliable, and proves that FRPR can provide excellent service.
- Considerations for providing service throughout the district, particularly areas south of Pueblo.

Commissioners also mentioned the following considerations:

- Details of train schedules, travel times, and service frequency can be time consuming and hard to figure out and should be a lesser focus at this stage of planning.
- Regions north and south of Denver have different desires of FRPR, and each region's needs should be considered when determining how to meet the project's goals.
- Look at similar rail projects around the world—for example, the Keystone in Pennsylvania, the Surfliner in Southern California, and regional services in Europe—and develop a plan with similar attributes and ability for success.
- Initiatives to develop a future FRPR system will need to follow federal requirements, including NEPA and FRA processes for project development, which include a full analysis of alignments and stations. This is critical to preserving opportunities for federal funding.

Appendix G provides additional input from Commissioners regarding the service and operation plan.

4.4 FINANCING CONSIDERATIONS

4.4.1 FINANCIAL PLAN

Commissioner recommendations on the financial plan included the following:

- It is imperative to define and understand all of the technical aspects of the project before requesting funding.
- Cost estimates should include both capital construction and operating and maintenance costs.
- The Board should have a high level of confidence in the cost estimates, and estimates should consider factors like those that negatively affected RTD's FasTracks plan (recession, material costs, scope creep).
- Potential impacts of the coronavirus pandemic will need to be analyzed.
- Communicate the highest cost estimate to the public, not the lowest.
- Obtaining Federal funding is critical, both to help fund the FRPR program and to bolster public support for it.
- FRPR has a great ability to improve economies of smaller cities if stations are sited strategically.
- Build on the support from Governor Polis and Senator Hickenlooper and engage with those with political leverage to help with funding.

It is imperative for the Board to define and understand the technical aspects of FRPR before requesting funding.

4.4.2 TAX BALLOT MEASURE

Commissioners had the following thoughts related to presenting a tax measure on the ballot:

- Clearly define the FRPR project for voters so they understand the details of what they're being asked to vote on.
- The public often doesn't like large public infrastructure projects because they typically cost more and take longer to implement than expected. Put the tax measure on the ballot in an even election year when there is higher voter turnout.
- The success of a tax ballot measure depends on local community members and advocates stepping up to lead. Include private rail advocates on the Board who can advocate and not get attacked politically.

5.0 NEXT STEPS

The passage of SB 21-238 by the Colorado General Assembly and the creation of the FRPR District is an important step towards the realization of a robust Front Range transit system

connecting Colorado Front Range communities. With the passage of a federal infrastructure bill providing much needed funding to Amtrak, the realization of connecting Pueblo with the Southwest Chief, one of the Rail Commission's original stated goals, is potentially closer than ever.

5.1 NEXT STEPS DEFINED IN SB 21-238

SB 21-238 provides a framework for next steps for FRPR, including:

- Collaborating with local and regional transportation districts to ensure interconnectivity between the FRPR project and regional transportation programs (several of which have been listed in Section 2.6 of this report).
- Advancing planning and engineering for the Northwest Rail corridor alignment. SB 21-238 notes a preference for the FRPR alignment along the Northwest Rail corridor and acknowledges that a complete analysis of feasible FRPR route alternatives will be required.
- Collaborating with Amtrak on interconnectivity options between FRPR and Amtrak's Southwest Chief, building on recent efforts investigating the feasibility of a connecting service.
- Publishing a proposed service development plan, operating plan, and detailed financial plan prior to submitting a tax ballot measure to voters for passenger rail funding.

5.2 SERVICE, OPERATING, AND FINANCIAL PLANS

To guide the project through the planning phases required by NEPA, the FRPR District needs to prepare the service, operating, and financial plans defined in SB 21-238. To help inform these plans, the FRPR District should:

- Collaborate with local and national stakeholders throughout the process.
- Build from the 2020 FRPR Project Alternatives Analysis to refine rail alignment and operations alternatives.
- Assess the potential for shared operations with freight and RTD corridors and opportunities for passenger rail to operate without degrading freight operations. FRA will provide oversight for this decision-making process, validating results for Colorado to be eligible for federally funded rail infrastructure improvement projects.
- Assess ridership projections to refine station assumptions; this will help inform development opportunities around stations, additional secondary stations, and integration with existing and planned transit.
- Further define infrastructure requirements, engineering speeds and profiles, and cost estimates.
- Identify potential phased approaches to opening and developing the service.
- Continue building on public momentum and stakeholder enthusiasm; support for enhanced public transit and the need for transportation solutions along the Front Range that promote sustainability and growth are at all-time highs.
- Continue to collaborate with Wyoming, New Mexico, and other potential services (e.g., the I-70 Mountain Corridor).



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