



DATE: April 21, 2016
TO: Transportation Commission
FROM: Mark Imhoff, Director - Division of Transit & Rail
SUBJECT: Winter Park Express Platform

Purpose

This memo provides a description of the Winter Park Express, and the request to fund the construction of a passenger platform at the base of Winter Park Resort, plus track improvements needed for Amtrak to provide this service.

Action

Approve the request for \$1.5 Million matching at 50/50 share of a \$3.0 Million overall project to be awarded and paid from the Senate Bill 228 transit funds.

Background

The goal: Starting in the 2016-2017 ski season, a person could land at Denver International Airport in the morning, take the new RTD / University of Colorado A-Line commuter train to Union Station, board the Winter Park Express (Ski Train renamed) and arrive at the slopes of Winter Park without ever needing a car -- all in about three hours. Winter Park says it's the only place in North America where it's possible to take the rails all the way to a ski resort.¹

Current forecasts for Senate Bill 228 funds overall are for \$350 Million to be transferred to CDOT across FY2016 (\$200M) and FY2017 (\$150M expected), with 10% of the total for transit. The ten percent to transit is approximately \$35 Million. The Division of Transit & Rail is evaluating a longer list of park-and-ride improvements, rural regional bus purchases, and Bustang expansions for SB 228 uses. The \$1.5 Million request for the Winter Park Express train platform represents less than five percent (5%) of the available SB 228 funding. The request for funding of this project comes ahead of bus and bus facilities due to the time-sensitive nature of the construction season and the goal to complete it in time for the 2016-2017 ski season.

The \$3 Million total project cost includes a concrete platform (14 feet x 950 feet) at the base of the Winter Park Ski Resort (approx \$2 Million of the total) plus track work that includes switch heaters, power derails (redundant safety mechanism), and construction management of the project.

Details

Ski Train Background

The Ski Train™ was a seasonal passenger service operated by the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad in the period 1940-2009. Starting in 1988, the train was operated by the AnSCO Investment Company, which had in turn purchased the Ski Train franchise from the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad in that year. The train stopped less than 100 yards (91 m) from the base of the ski lifts of Winter Park Resort. There was one trip in each direction per day, with a travel time of 2 hours and 15 minutes, assuming no delays from freight rail traffic. The Ski Train made its final run to Winter Park on March 29, 2009. The Ski Train was burdened with escalating costs such as liability insurance coverage, operational conflicts with freight traffic, and substantial uncertainties posed by redevelopment

¹ <http://www.cpr.org/news/story/winter-park-ski-train-reboot-shifting-higher-gear>



of Denver's Union Station. These reasons combined with the worldwide economic maladies in 2009 meant that it was no longer feasible for the Ski Train to be operated.²

In 2009, after the Anschutz Company (AnSCO) sold off the ski train citing poor profitability and the downturn in the economy, another private company, Iowa Pacific Holdings, made plans to operate the train. They even sold tickets for the excursions. However, disagreements between Amtrak and Iowa Pacific, including liability costs, forced the company to cancel the trains and refund around 13,000 passengers who had pre-booked seats on the train.

The market uncertainties have all been resolved since 2009. The economy overall has rebounded. Denver Union Station was re-opened in 2015, and the RTD / University of Colorado A-Line to the airport opens April 22, 2016. Amtrak has itself committed to be the operator, resolving the liability/insurance issues. With Amtrak as the operator, and established business partner, Union Pacific also gained confidence in the deal.

Construction Project Details

The platform is necessary to the safe operation of trains, separating passenger trains from through-freight trains. In addition the platform provides safe boarding area for Winter Park visitors, rather than loading/unloading on the trackway or relying on step-stools. The platform, switch heaters, and power derails are all heated to prevent freezing in the winter. In the case of the platform, heat is important, so snow is neither cleared into the trackway nor has to be hauled away. The switch heaters are both at Winter Park where passengers board/alight, and in Fraser where the Amtrak Train is stored during the day, and turns back to serve the return trip to Denver in the afternoon. CDOT staff have received copies of design drawings and cost estimates for review purposes.

Funding Match Details

In addition to CDOT's 50% contribution of \$1.5 million to the Winter Park Express project, Intrawest Resort Holdings, Winter Park Resort, the Town of Winter Park, and the City of Denver will provide the remaining 50% of the total \$3 million project. While the municipalities are finalizing their specific commitments, Intrawest and Winter Park Resort has pledged to make up whatever differences might arise in order to ensure the project is completed on-time. The project and contract are expected to reflect a 20 year asset life with appropriate terms & conditions on CDOT's match.

Operating Details

Amtrak operated a Winter Park Express excursion train on Saturday, March 14, 2015, taking passengers and their ski gear by Amtrak train from Denver Union Station directly to the resort that morning – then back to Denver that evening – in celebration of the resort's 75th anniversary. Due to overwhelming demand, Amtrak and Winter Park Resort added another Winter Park Express excursion train on Sunday, March 15.³ This has given Amtrak and Winter Park Resort confidence that the train can be operated at break-even levels or at a profit. Winter Park Resorts has pledged to cover Amtrak's operating costs in the event of a passenger revenue shortfall.

Benefits

Dedicated train service from Denver to Winter Park will take an estimated 400 cars off the I-70 corridor and Berthoud Pass during peak weekend days, providing travelers a safe, reliable travel alternative. I-70 is a strategic corridor important to Colorado's overall economic growth and tourism industry. Train service, together with the recently-implemented peak period shoulder lanes (PPSL), extend the life of I-70 before major investments are required to continue meeting Colorado's growing population demands.

Train service would also benefit the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD), the largest adaptive sports program in the world. Given the importance of this project to the region, the town, the resort, and the NSCD, Intrawest and Winter Park Resort are committed to ensure the platform project comes to fruition.

² Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ski_Train

³ <http://media.amtrak.com/?s=winter+park+express>



Options

1. Approve the request at the April 2016 meeting. This will ensure that the Winter Park Express platform can be built during this summer 2016 construction season and that operations can begin for the 2016-2017 ski season. This is the staff recommended action.
2. Provide a conditional approval in April 2016 or delay approval until May 2016. This option would allow CDOT staff to proceed and prepare contracting documents to allow the Winter Park Express to still operate during the 2016-2017 ski season, unless and until TC-specified conditions are met or TC questions are fully answered in May. This conditional/revokable approval option would revert to option 3 if the conditions were not met or questions not answered.
3. Defer approval until all transit projects using SB 228 funds can be presented together, comprehensively. Estimate is that for the remaining \$28.5 Million in SB 228 funding, analysis and Transportation Planning Input would allow a Transportation Commission decision in approximately August 2016. This would mean the Winter Park Express service is delayed a full year to the 2017-2018 ski season.
4. Consider denying the project as benefiting private enterprise. However, Winter Park Resorts is a public/private venture between the City and County of Denver and Intrawest Resort Holdings. Further, Amtrak is a quasi-public entity and has structured an operating deal with Winter Park Resorts to cover operating costs, not likely to be profitable.

Next Steps

If approved, CDOT would contract by May, construction would begin in June/July, and finish by September/October.

Attachments

Letter of support from Union Pacific Railroad

Letter of support from Amtrak



October 2, 2015

DJ Stadler
Executive Vice President and Chief Operations Officer
National Railroad Passenger Corporation
60 Massachusetts Ave NE 2E-142
Washington, DC 20002

Re: Amtrak Colorado Ski Train Passenger Special

Dear DJ:

As discussed at our August meeting, Union Pacific has been fully engaged in working with Amtrak to identify a plan that would allow Amtrak to develop a safe operation for a seasonal ski train between Denver and Winter Park, Colorado.

We understand the long tradition and popularity of the previous ski train special service. As you know, in 2014-2015 Union Pacific worked with Amtrak in an abbreviated time frame to quickly negotiate and approve a special run of a similar passenger service, even allowing a second date to be added to that special run which occurred in March 2015. These arrangements demonstrate our desire to be a good partner and our willingness to accommodate similar service in the future.

Our intention now is to assist Amtrak in making a feasible proposal for a similar special ski train service between Denver and Winter Park, with unloading at Winter Park. Summarized below are the safety and operational requirements to make that possible.

We recognize the investment required to operate this service, and as such we are agreeable to a multi-year agreement with annual renewal opportunities thereafter. If these conditions cannot be met in 2016, Union Pacific is also agreeable to allowing a service to the existing Amtrak platform at Fraser in the interim.

Union Pacific's top priority is safety, and we know that Amtrak – as well as your customer, Winter Park Ski Resort – share our utmost commitment to ensuring a safe operation.

Union Pacific can agree to this service and is willing to negotiate terms; however, we cannot waive safety requirements. During the March 2015 special passenger train service, we were reminded of the absolute need to have standard passenger facilities in place – especially at this unique location at the bore of a tunnel in a high alpine, variable weather and steep grade location. In addition to those environmental factors, the nature of this service includes passengers transporting equipment and luggage, while also often attending to youth passengers. If anything, this set of circumstances might justify exceeding standards – certainly not seeking waivers of requirements or otherwise modifying specifications of platform facilities. Additionally, this location does not meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) specifications.

DJ Stadtler
October 2, 2015
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In summary, Union Pacific is agreeable to a special Amtrak ski train service if the following passenger safety requirements and passenger-specific infrastructure enhancements are met:

- A standard passenger platform must be installed at Winter Park.
- Power derails and switch heaters must be installed at the equipment layover track at Fraser.
- Union Pacific would agree to passenger loading and unloading directly off of the main line at Winter Park.
- Union Pacific would agree to an initial three-year service agreement, instead of an annual agreement, in consideration of the costs to Amtrak associated with such infrastructure investments.
- Union Pacific would approve an alternative service on the weekend ski season to operate from the passenger terminal in Fraser should there be an interest from Amtrak to begin service prior to the necessary safety and infrastructure installations.

My colleagues and I look forward to continued dialogue. I have provided direction to my internal team, which will keep me informed of progress on this discussion. Josephine Jordan, Union Pacific's general manager of passenger operations, is our primary point of contact for this service. Please feel free to reach her at (402) 636-7227 or jjordan1@up.com.

Sincerely,



Cameron A. Scott



7 April 2016

Colorado Transportation Commission
Colorado Department of Transportation
4201 E. Arkansas Avenue
Denver, CO 80222

RE: Winter Park Resort Grant Application - SB 228 Transit Funds

Dear Commissioners:

Amtrak is pleased to support Winter Park Resort's request for funding for capital improvements, that have been outlined by the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), that are necessary for seasonal passenger rail service to the resort. Once the improvements have been completed, Amtrak would be able to restore seasonal service between Denver and the Winter Park Resort—continuing a cherished and time-honored service for Colorado residents and visitors.

Amtrak has been closely working with the Winter Park Resort and UPRR teams not only to make sure that the two trips that took place in March 2015 were a success, but that the future proposed operations to/from the resort are a success as well. Amtrak has the operations plan in place, and we currently hold monthly conference call with the UPRR and the Winter Park Resort to ensure that the many components of this projects are moving forward, and that all parties are ready to move forward with construction, and service in 2017.

In addition to restoring a transportation and cultural connection that is valued by the residents of Colorado, this project will also help hold down the ever-increasing, weekend, vehicle congestion on Interstate 70, as well as help improve air quality by reducing vehicle emissions. This project also leverages one of Denver's newest transportation improvements—the new RTD / University of Colorado A Line, connecting Denver International Airport and Union Station in Downtown Denver. The University of Colorado A Line, when combined with the Winter Park Express passenger rail service, will provide a seamless, car free, connection for visitors to the State. This unique transportation experience will benefit economic development along the route and the economy of Colorado.

Amtrak looks forward to our continued work with of partners on this very important project for the State of Colorado. If you should have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "R. Eaton", with a long, sweeping underline.

Robert C. Eaton
Government Affairs

Resolution # TC-

Approve the Winter Park Express Platform Project Utilizing SB 228 Transit Funds

Whereas, SB 228 funds have been allocated to CDOT for FY 2016, and at least 10% are to be used for transit projects; and

Whereas, the Transportation Commission supports the multimodal development of the State's transportation system, and the reduction of auto trips on I-70 and US 40 (Berthoud Pass); and

Whereas, the Division of Transit & Rail is developing a recommended list of SB 228 transit projects for Transportation Commission consideration later this summer; and

Whereas, Winter Park Resorts (WPR) has negotiated agreements between WPR, Amtrak and the Union Pacific Railroad to reinstate ski train service (Winter Park Express) for the 2016-17 ski season; and

Whereas, the Union Pacific Railroad has set forth passenger platform, safety and railroad operational improvements required to allow Winter Park Express service; and

Whereas, WPR has defined a \$3M construction project for the summer of 2016 and requested \$1.5M in SB 228 funds.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Commission approves a \$1.5M grant utilizing SB 228 transit funds, in advance of the full SB 228 transit project recommendations, in order to allow WPR to construct the Winter Park Express platform and related railroad elements over the summer of 2016.