Joint Passenger Rail Service: A Coordinated Plan to Deliver Passenger Rail from Denver to Fort Collins by 2029 Fact Sheet

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Overview

In 2024, the Colorado General Assembly passed Senate Bill 24-184, directing Colorado's three major transit entities – CDOT, RTD, and the Front Range Passenger Rail District ("FRPRD") – to jointly collaborate on a plan to implement passenger rail along Denver Union to Fort Collins. This initiative, called **Northern Front Range Joint Passenger Rail Service or "Joint Service"**, will deliver a starter passenger rail service connecting Denver Union Station to Fort Collins. Senate Bill 24-184 directed the agencies to deliver service no later than January 1, 2029, serving as Phase I of the broader Front Range Passenger Rail ("FRPR") vision.

This collaborative effort leverages:

- Existing contracts, authorities, and technical studies;
- Federal benefits for intercity passenger rail that drives costs savings;
- Cost savings from having only one, streamlined passenger rail service operator on the BNSFs freight rail line;
- Pooled existing funding sources of RTD's FasTrack sales tax, a new daily rental car fee established in SB24-184, and a new extraction fee on oil and gas production established in SB24-230;
- NO new taxes to begin service – existing revenues, if committed by the managing entities, are sufficient to launch 3 daily RT services by 2029.

The six state agencies are collaborating together to bring the Northern Front Range Joint Passenger Rail Service by January 1, 2029:

- Colorado Governor's Office
- Colorado Department of Transportation ("CDOT")
- Colorado Transportation Investment Office ("CTIO")
- Clean Transit Enterprise ("CTE")
- Regional Transportation District ("RTD")
- Front Range Passenger Rail District ("FRPRD")

Why Joint Service?

Currently, multiple agencies are tasked with delivering rail service along the Front Range. However, independent service and projects are not viable in the near term:

- RTD's 2024 Northwest Peak Service Study found that service from Denver to Longmont would cost the agency between $52M - $56M annually and could not begin service until 2050 due to capital and funding constraints.
- FRPRD cannot implement its service until it completes its Service Development Plan ("SDP"), and publishes both an operations plan and financial plan, before it can proceed with a ballot measure, the timing and outcome of which remain uncertain.

Joint Service provides for an earlier and more cost-effective project delivery method which:

- Combines RTD's Northwest Peak Service Study with FRPRD's intercity passenger rail service for a new hybrid service called Northern Front Range Joint Passenger Rail Service.
- Leverages the cost efficiencies intercity passenger rail can achieve that RTDs commuter rail service cannot. For example, an operator, like Amtrak, provides insurance and indemnification in their operating cost model, as well as the ability to lease rolling stock and contract heavy maintenance, as well as access to competitive federal grants.
- Leverages cost savings by having only one passenger rail service operator on the BNSF mainline and thus ensuring as few new infrastructure capacity projects as possible for passenger rail service to begin.
    - Most importantly, with multiple agencies charged with delivering passenger rail service, this approach ensures there is a **single operator operating on a single alignment through a single access agreement** with BNSF, streamlining the negotiations, cost, and operations.

This approach meets legislative intent and instills new voter confidence by:
- Demonstrating progress on an unfinished FasTracks project, instilling trust and confidence back into the electorate;
- Building steady momentum for a future FRPRD ballot measure by visibly addressing regional mobility, climate, and transportation needs.

Core Service Assumptions

Alignment:
Beginning at Denver Union Station, Joint Service seeks to utilize RTD's B-Line to Westminster, then transitions to BNSF's freight corridor to reach Fort Collins.

Joint Service Proposed Stations:
- Denver Union Station (Origination)
- Westminster - 1 station
- Broomfield - 1 station
- Louisville
- Boulder
- Longmont
- Loveland
- Fort Collins

Joint Service will be a hybrid between Front Range Rail and RTD's Northwest Rail Peak Service routes, while maintaining intercity passenger rail classifications and the many benefits that drive cost savings from this approach. This will result in stops at: Denver Union Station, Westminster, Broomfield, Louisville, Boulder, Longmont, Loveland, ans Fort Collins.

Frequency:
Initial launch of **3 daily roundtrips** ("RTs"). Senate Bill 24-184 directed CDOT to examine the cost scenarios of 3 and 5 daily roundtrips. Following that initial study released on March 1, 2025, 3 daily roundtrips is feasible with existing revenue streams (SB184 Rental Car Fee, SB230 Oil and Gas Fee, and existing RTD FasTracks Sales and Use Tax Revenue).

Rolling Stock and Capacity:
Initial service may operate with a 5-car train (~200 seats per train), yielding approximately 445,000 annual passenger seats for 3 RT/day service. A goal is to procure low-emission technology to meet the State's climate goals.

Infrastructure:
Joint Service may require minimal capital projects, but will need the installation of Positive Train Control, a significant one-time capital investment that will benefit freight rail safety for existing freight traffic and future phases of Front Range Passenger Rail. In addition to Positive Train Control, upgraded grade crossings and operational track improvements may be needed to provide passenger rail track conditions.

Financial Framework:

RTD, CTIO, CTE can pool available resources to deliver service by Jan 1, 2029, without asking voters for a new sales tax.

Funding Sources:
- SB24-184 Congestion Impact Fee: $3 a day fee on all rental cars
- SB24-230 Oil & Gas Production Fee: Fee on oil and gas extraction
- RTD Contributions: Existing revenue from the FasTrack Sales Tax
- Farebox & Ancillary Revenue collected during operations

Governance and Delivery Structure

Joint Governance: The six parties to Joint Service have formed a Joint Service Executive Oversight Committee (JSEOC) comprised of six voting members from each of the following:
- Colorado Department of Transportation ("CDOT")
- Colorado Transportation Investment Office ("CTIO")
- Clean Transit Enterprise ("CTE")
- Regional Transportation District ("RTD")
- Front Range Passenger Rail District ("FRPRD")
- Colorado Governor's Office

The Parties above entered into an Interagency Agreement ("IGA") as the legal backbone for the Joint Service effort which outlines the financial contributions, responsibilities, authorities, and oversight mechanisms to advance the Project. Upon the IGA being formally executed, the parties have entered into an access agreement negotiation with BNSF.

- The adoption of SB-184 reinforced the idea of collaboratively working together to access available federal funding, but also to accelerate the delivery of rail service to commence by January 2029. The relevant entities have thus adopted an IGA that will establish oversight and guidance for the group of agencies to jointly develop and provide rail service.
- It is not uncommon for governmental agencies to combine their powers and their money to achieve a mutual goal. An IGA was the best legal tool available for the Parties to work together to collaboratively plan for an eventually run Joint Service.

Joint Service may, in the future, be acquired or merged by the Front Range Passenger Rail District upon a successful ballot measure.