Purpose and Need Memorandum

To:	Federal Highway Administration
From:	Colorado Department of Transportation
Subject:	25563 I-25 US 36 to 104th Avenue Safety and Operations Improvements
Date:	July 12, 2024; Revised August 15, 2025; Revised December 18, 2025; Revised August 12, 2026

1.0 Introduction

The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in coordination with the Regional Transportation District (RTD), Adams County, City of Northglenn, and City of Thornton, are evaluating transportation improvements to Interstate 25 (I-25) between the US Highway 36 (US 36)/I-76/I-270 interchange (milepost (MP) 215.85) and 104th Avenue (MP 221.45) (see **Figure 1**). This 5.6-mile segment of I-25 provides major access between downtown Denver and the communities of the northern Denver metropolitan area. It is one of the most congested corridors in the Denver metropolitan area, with an estimated 2023 average annual daily traffic count (AADT) of over 270,000 vehicles near US 36 (station ID 101017), about 10 percent of which are freight trucks (CDOT 2023a).

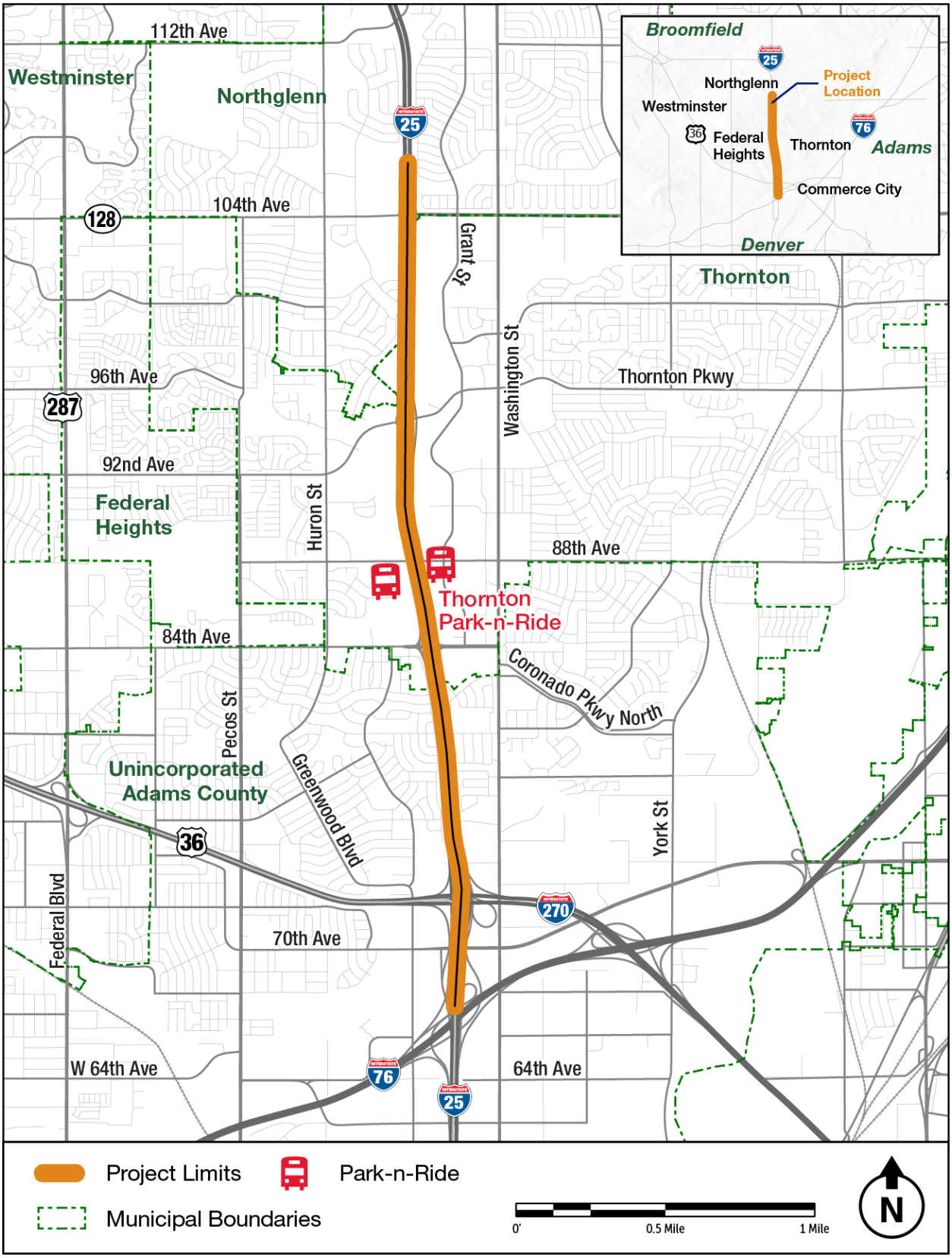
This section of I-25 consists of three general-purpose travel lanes in each direction and a High Occupancy Vehicle/Express Lane (HOV/Express Lane), constructed in 2016, in each direction. The corridor includes four interchanges with I-25: US Highway 36 (US 36)/I-270/I-76, 84th Avenue, Thornton Parkway, and 104th Avenue. An RTD Park-n-Ride with bus slip ramps is located just south of 88th Avenue, and 43 RTD Route 120X buses travel in each direction on I-25 daily to serve the station between 5:30 AM and 12:00 AM on weekdays. The highway shoulder widths range between 2 and 12 feet, and the grade of the highway varies from nearly flat to 4 percent. Standard shoulder width for an interstate is 10 to 12 feet. The corridor speed limit is 55 miles per hour (mph).

CDOT previously conducted an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study, a series of safety audits, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)-level planning, and supplemental operational, transit, and safety analyses that recommended improvements to this segment of I-25. Some of the previously recommended improvements have been constructed, such as the Express Lanes approved in the **North I-25 Record of Decision 1** (ROD1) (FHWA and CDOT 2011), while others have not yet been implemented. The Purpose and Need for this current I-25 from US 36 to 104th Avenue Safety and Operations Improvements project (the project) incorporates information from these previous studies.

The safety conditions included in this Purpose and Need are based on safety data for the years 2021 to 2023, and presented in the Safety Assessment Reports (CDOT 2024c; CDOT 2025c).

The existing traffic conditions included in this Purpose and Need memorandum are based on 2024 in-field traffic data.

Figure 1. Project Limits



2.0 Project Purpose and Needs

The purpose of the project is to improve I-25 between US 36 and 104th Avenue to address safety concerns and traffic operations.

The project is needed to:

- Improve safety
- Improve traffic operations

Each of these needs is described in **Sections 2.1** and **2.2** below. In addition to addressing project needs, the project also has the following goal:

- Minimize environmental and community impacts caused by the project

2.1 Improve Safety

Crashes and other incidents that disrupt traffic flow, such as vehicle breakdowns or cargo spills, occur on a near-daily basis on I-25 within the project limits. When incidents occur, the lack of shoulders and narrow shoulders on I-25 result in lane closures, increased traffic congestion, risk of secondary crashes, and unsafe conditions for emergency responders, because vehicles and emergency responders cannot pull out of the traffic lane and onto the shoulder.

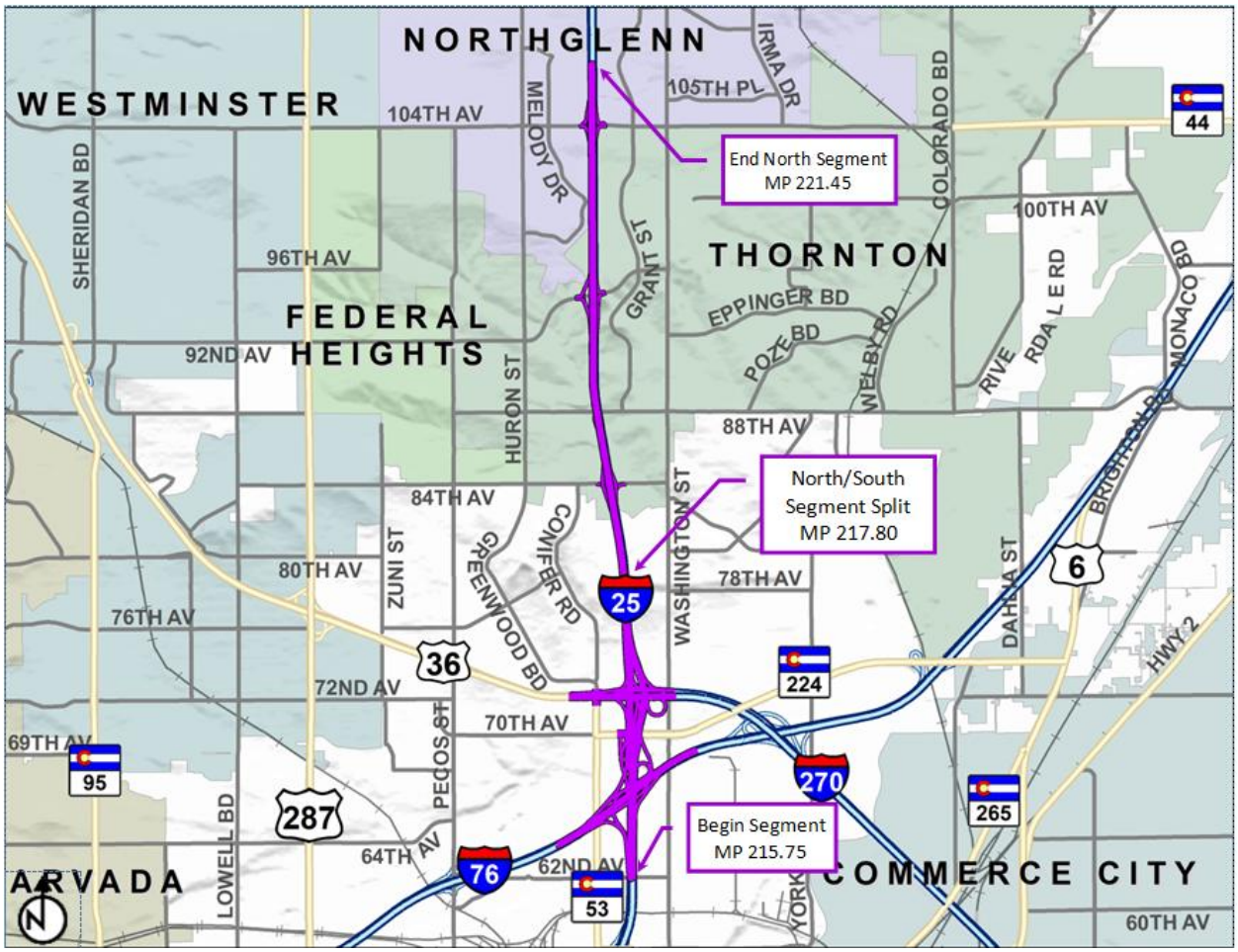
Within the project limits, 90 percent of the I-25 highway has a Level of Service of Safety (LOSS) rating of IV for severe crashes—the worst possible rating. This means severe crashes occur often, and road improvements have a high potential to reduce them. The sections below provide detailed information on safety problems in the project limits.

2.1.1 Safety Assessments

CDOT conducted Safety Assessment Reports in the project corridor in 2024 and 2025, analyzing traffic and safety data from the years 2021-2023. The reports' combined study areas comprise I-25 from MP 215.75 – MP 221.45 and the ramps in the US 36/I-76/I-270, 84th Avenue/I-25, Thornton Parkway/I-25, and 104th Avenue/I-25 interchanges (see **Figure 2**). The reports' study areas include roadway mileage that lies outside of the project limits; thus, the total crash numbers referred to in **Table 1** and **Figure 3** include some crashes that occurred outside the project limits.

Most crashes in 2021-2023 occurred during rush hour in the peak direction – southbound I-25 in the AM and northbound I-25 in the PM – and were caused by traffic congestion. Ninety percent of crashes along mainline I-25 within the reports' study areas were either sideswipe (same direction) or rear end collisions, which are typically related to congestion and merging/weaving (CDOT 2024c, CDOT 2025c). The mainline safety data includes the general-purpose lanes and excludes HOV/Express Lanes.

Figure 2. Safety Assessment Reports' Study Areas



Source: CDOT 2024c; CDOT 2025c

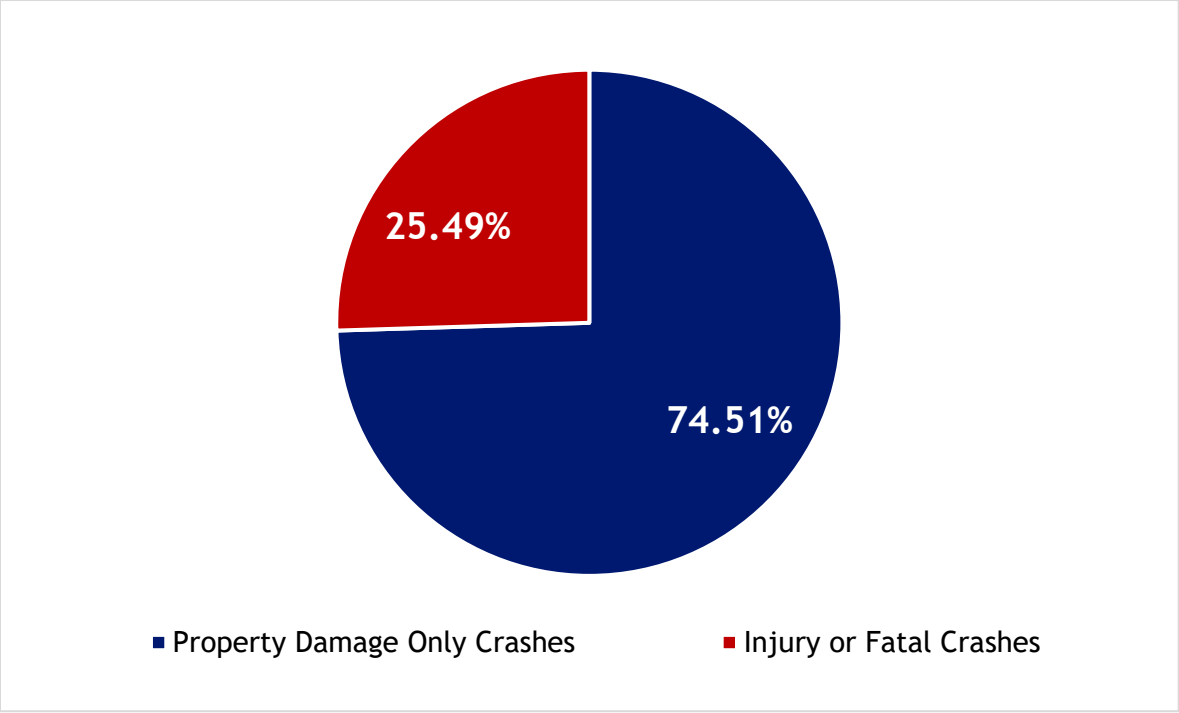
Table 1. Crash History Within Safety Reports' Study Areas by Year

Year	PDO [1] Crashes	Injury Crashes	Fatal Crashes	Total Crashes
2021	767	256	4	1,027
2022	672	218	8	898
2023	753	263	1	1,017
Total	2,192	737	**13**	2,942
Yearly Average	730.7	245.7	4.3	980.7

[1] PDO – Property Damage Only

Source: CDOT 2024c; CDOT 2025c

Figure 3. Crash History Within Safety Reports' Study Areas by Percentage from 2021-2023



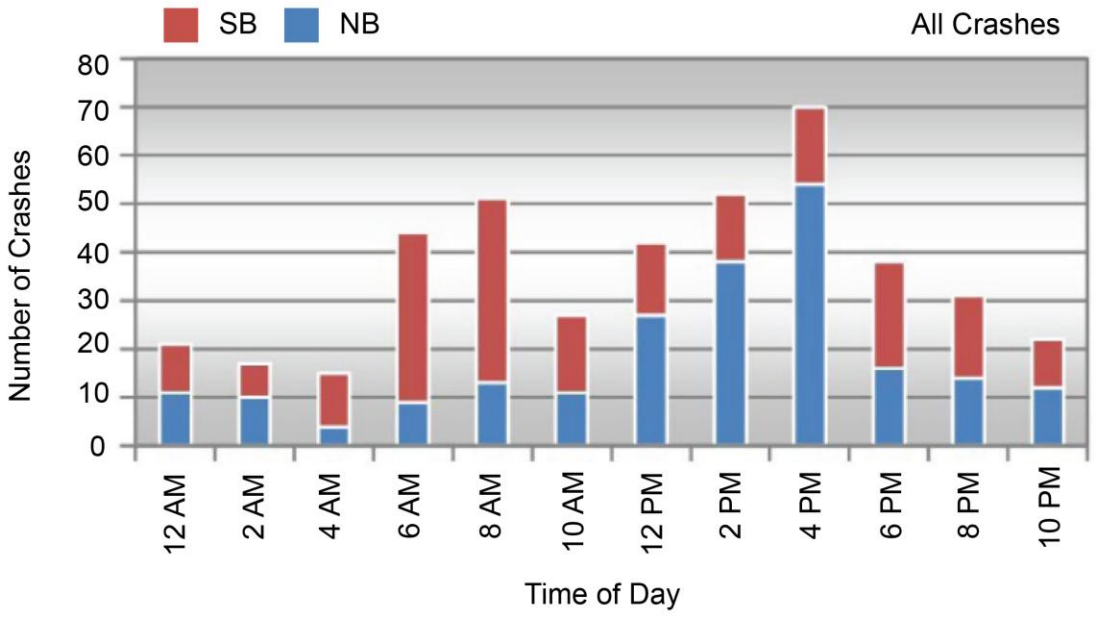
Source: CDOT 2024c; CDOT 2025c

During the three-year period from 2021-2023, 2,942 crashes occurred within the Safety Assessment Reports' study areas, averaging 2.7 crashes per day. Of the 2,942 crashes, 13 (0.44%) were fatal, 737 (25.05%) resulted in injuries, and 2,192 (74.51%) caused property damage only.

2.1.2 I-25 General-Purpose Lanes Crash History – South Segment of Study Area (MP 215.75 – MP 217.79)

Figure 4 illustrates the number of all crashes along the I-25 mainline in the south portion of the safety reports' study areas, between MP 215.75 and MP 217.79, by time of day and direction. Southbound crashes along this segment showed a distinct peak during the morning peak period, then remained steady throughout the rest of the day. Northbound crashes along this segment saw a distinct peak period starting around 12 PM, followed by a significant drop after 6 PM suggesting vehicle collisions are highly correlated with congestion in this area.

Figure 4. Mainline I-25 Crashes from MP 215.75-MP 217.79 by Time of Day and Direction (2021-2023)



Source: CDOT 2024c

In this south portion of the I-25 mainline, the crash frequency increased substantially in 2023 compared to 2021 or 2022, particularly for rear end and sideswipe crash types. To evaluate whether increased traffic volumes can be attributed to the notable increase in crashes, estimated AADT data from CDOT's MS2 Traffic Count Data Source was reviewed near the southern terminus (north of State Highway 224 and south of US 36; Location ID# 106665) (CDOT 2025b). Bi-directional traffic volumes increased slightly during the same time period – AADT was approximately 258,642 vehicles in 2021, 262,000 vehicles in 2022, and 264,358 vehicles in 2023, reflecting an overall growth in estimated AADT of about 2%. In contrast, total reported crashes along this segment more than doubled between 2021 and 2023 (from 103 to 221 combined in both directions). This comparison suggests that the notable rise in crashes cannot be attributed solely to increased traffic volumes. The reason for the significant increase is unknown but could be due to a change in driver behavior, a change in enforcement, or a change in reporting (CDOT 2024c).

Table 2 shows the crashes along mainline I-25 by year and by crash type in the south portion of the safety reports' study area, from MP 215.75 to MP 217.79, travelling in the southbound direction and the northbound direction. The predominant crash types are congestion-related. In the south portion of the reports' study area, rear end collisions, typically associated with congestion and inconsistent travel speeds, accounted for 45 percent (196 out of 433) of mainline I-25 crashes, while sideswipe collisions, typically associated with lane changes and merging traffic activity, accounted for 34 percent (148 out of 433) of mainline I-25 crashes.

Table 2. I-25 Mainline Crashes from MP 215.75-MP 217.79 by Type, Year, and Direction

Year	Rear End Crashes SB / NB	Sideswipe Crashes SB / NB	Other Crashes [1] SB / NB	Total Crashes SB / NB
2021	18 / 31	14 / 14	12 / 14	44 / 59
2022	24 / 22	23 / 18	11 / 11	58 / 51
2023	52 / 49	40 / 39	19 / 22	111 / 110
Total	94 / 102	77 / 71	42 / 47	213 / 220

[1] Other crashes include crashes occurring from fixed objects, parked motor vehicles, and cargo/debris.

Source: CDOT 2024c; CDOT 2025c

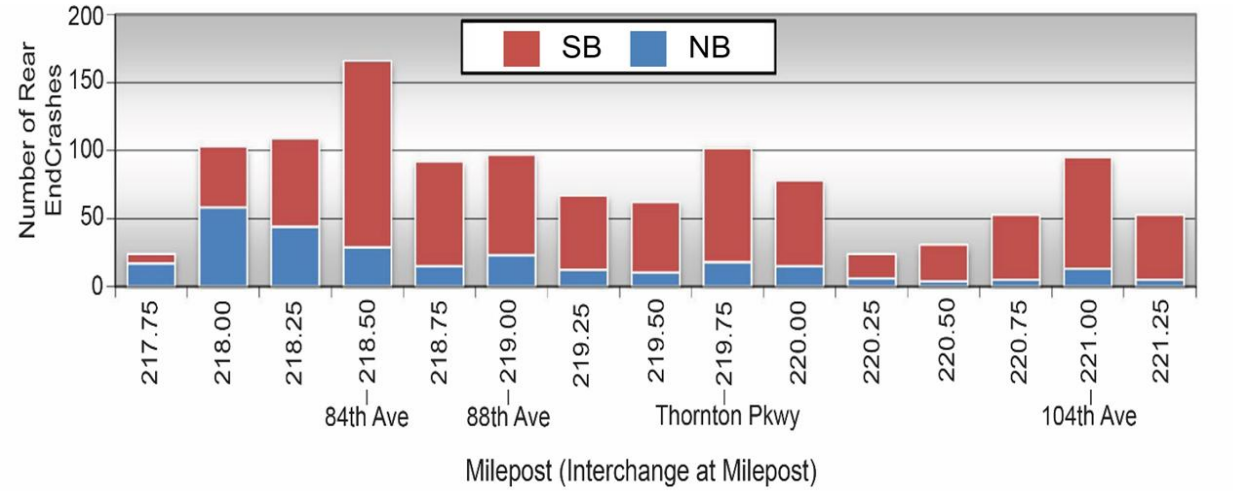
2.1.3 I-25 General-Purpose Lanes Crash History – North Segment of Study Area (MP 217.80 – MP 221.45)

In the north segment of the project area, between MP 217.80 and MP 221.45, rear end collisions and sideswipe collisions made up 76 percent (1,159 of 1,529 crashes) and 17 percent (257 of 1,529 crashes) of total crashes on mainline I-25, respectively. Five of the total crashes were fatal. Of the rear end crashes along this segment of I-25, the majority occur in the southbound direction (882 of 1,159). The majority of those southbound rear end crashes involved slow or stopped vehicles (669 of 882). The 2025 Safety Assessment found that heavy traffic congestion was the overriding causal factor in nearly all significant identifiable crash patterns for rear end collisions in this area, illustrated by the high number of southbound rear end crashes as drivers encounter congestion when entering the Denver metropolitan area.

Figure 5 illustrates the rear end crashes on mainline I-25, in the north segment of the reports' study area, by direction and location in 0.25-mile increments. Milepost 218.5 at the I-25/84th Avenue interchange sees the most crashes, largely due to heavy congestion in the southbound direction. Drivers frequently encounter slow or stopped conditions, and merging from 84th Avenue to position for the left-hand I-270 exit creates added speed differentials and lane-change conflicts. Combined with high volumes and limited weaving space, these factors lead to a concentration of rear end and sideswipe collisions in this vicinity.

Heavy vehicles, which are defined as trucks over 10,000 pounds and buses with more than 15 passengers, have substantially fewer crashes than passenger vehicles. Most heavy vehicle crashes concentrated between MP 218.00 and MP 221.00, with the highest counts at MP 218.50 (13 crashes), MP 218.00 and MP 218.25 (9 crashes each), and MP 219.75 (10 crashes) between 2021 and 2023. Other mileposts generally record only one or two crashes, and some none at all. This clustering of crashes occurs near interchanges where weaving traffic is more common, as well as in the southbound direction as vehicles are positioning for the left side exit on to I-270. The southbound direction of travel consistently accounted for the majority of heavy vehicle crashes, ranging from 66 to 83 percent annually from 2021-2023.

Figure 5. Mainline I-25 Rear End Crashes from MP 217.80-MP 221.45 by Direction and Location (2021-2023)



Source: CDOT 2025c

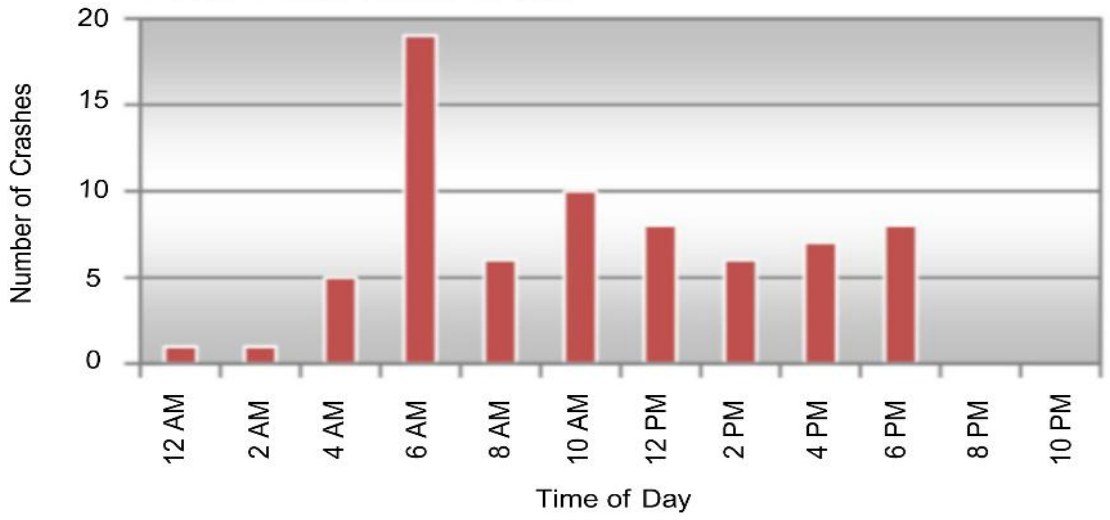
2.1.4 I-25 HOV/Express Lane Crash History

In the HOV/Express Lane from MP 217.80 to MP 221.45, 95 crashes occurred during the three-year study period, and 72 of those (76 percent) occurred in the southbound direction. A peak number of crashes also occurs at 6:00 AM. Of the 95 crashes, 27 resulted in injuries and 2 resulted in fatalities. Rear end collisions made up 48 percent (46 out of 95) of these crashes and sideswipe (same direction) collisions accounted for 45 percent (43 out of 95). Only 16 crashes occurred in HOV/Express Lanes south of MP 217.80, and no common causal patterns were detected (CDOT 2024c).

Figure 6 and **Figure 7** illustrate these crashes by time of day travelling in the southbound direction and the northbound direction, respectively. **Table 3** shows the crashes in the HOV/Express Lane by year and by crash type travelling in the southbound and northbound directions. As with the crashes in the general-purpose lanes, a high concentration of crashes occurs during the peak traffic AM period in the southbound direction, and during the peak traffic PM period in the northbound direction (CDOT 2025c). Also note that the net number of crashes increased from 2021 to 2023.

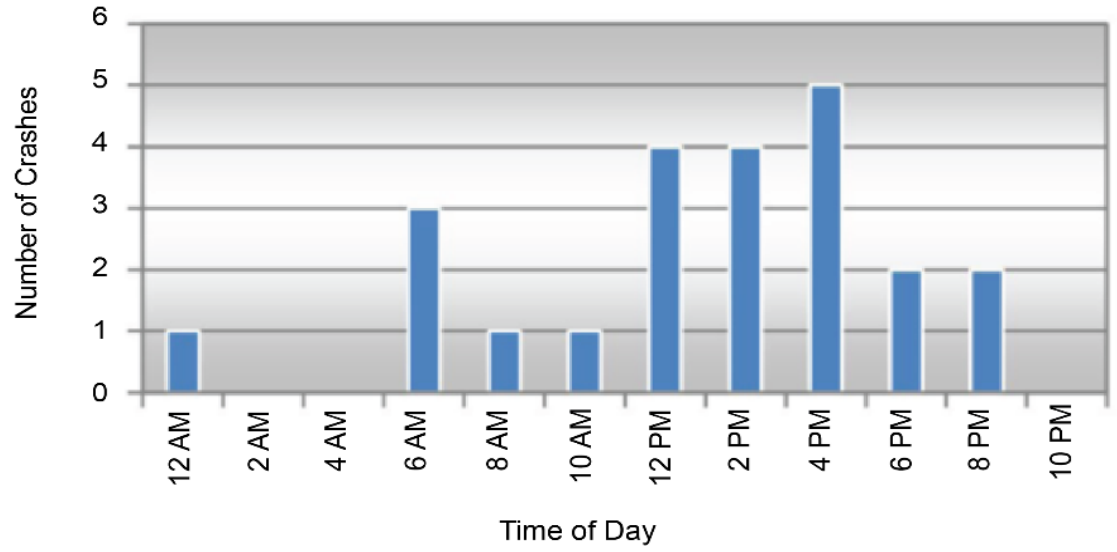
During congested periods, the speeds in the HOV/Express Lanes may be up to 45 mph higher than the speeds in the adjacent general-purpose lanes. Excessive speeds in the Express Lanes, along with slow-moving vehicles that illegally enter the Express Lanes, cause crashes related to speed differentials.

Figure 6. Southbound HOV/Express Lane I-25 Crashes from MP 217.80-MP 221.45 by Time of Day (2021-2023)



Source: CDOT 2025c

Figure 7. Northbound I-25 HOV/Express Lane Crashes from MP 217.80-MP 221.45 by Time of Day (2021-2023)



Source: CDOT 2025c

Table 3. I-25 HOV/Express Lane Crashes from MP 217.80-MP 221.45 by Type, Year, and Direction

Year	Rear End Crashes SB / NB	Sideswipe Crashes SB / NB	Other Crashes [1] SB / NB	Total Crashes SB / NB
2021	12 / 2	5 / 4	2 / 0	19 / 6
2022	10 / 2	11 / 6	2 / 0	23 / 8
2023	16 / 4	13 / 4	1 / 1	30 / 9
Total	38 / 8	29 / 14	5 / 1	72 / 23

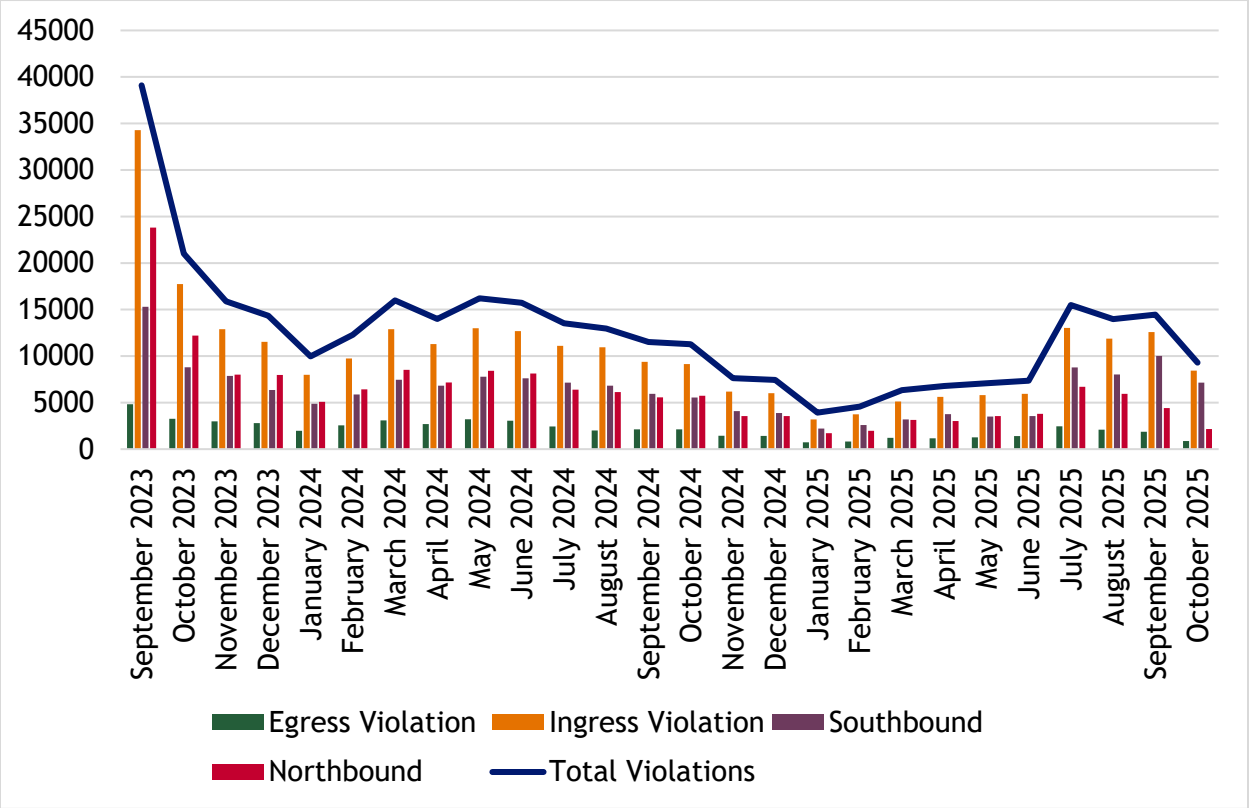
[1] Other crashes include crashes occurring from concrete barriers and pedestrians.
Source: CDOT 2025c

The 2025 Safety Assessment identified a crash pattern of sideswipe collisions in the HOV/Express Lane ingress/egress area between 88th Avenue and 84th Avenue. The report notes that this ingress/egress zone overlaps the interchange ramps in this area in a way that is not intuitive and is likely resulting in additional unnecessary lane changes in and out of the HOV/Express Lane.

Vehicles illegally entering Express Lanes in areas other than designated entrances/exits are a consistent problem across the Express Lane system. Excessive speeds in the Express Lanes have also been a consistent problem. Speed enforcement, in the form of stopping and ticketing offending drivers, was previously not feasible on this section of I-25 because narrow shoulders along the Express Lane do not provide room to pull vehicles over. As of September 1, 2023, roadside vehicle operations technology was installed to remotely monitor and ticket drivers who violate Express Lane rules. CDOT provided Express Lane violation data from their Safety and Toll Enforcement (STEP) Program. As shown in **Figure 8**, remote monitoring systems detected 39,096 Express Lane violations within the project limits in September 2023. Although violations have declined substantially since the system was implemented, the 9,303 violations recorded in October 2025 indicate that the issue remains.

A total of 328,075 Express Lane violations were detected from September 2023 to October 2025. Of these, 272,156 were ingress violations (83 percent), where drivers entered Express Lanes illegally. Ingress violations are more dangerous than egress violations because drivers are weaving abruptly into faster-moving Express Lanes, creating sudden conflict points that increase the risk of side-impact and high-speed merging collisions. Express Lane violations were evenly split between southbound and northbound directions.

Figure 8. I-25 Express Lane Violations from September 2023 – October 2025



Source: CDOT STEP Program Data

2.1.5 Level of Service of Safety

A highway's Level of Service of Safety (LOSS) is a measure of its safety performance compared to expected safety conditions. LOSS categories range from I to IV, increasing with potential for reduction in either severe or total crashes through infrastructure improvements along a particular segment of roadway. The LOSS for Highways Web App database shows that from 2018 to 2022, 90 percent of the project corridor (MP 217.00-MP 218.00 and MP 217.40-northern terminus MP 221.45) was at LOSS IV for severe crashes, indicating this corridor has a higher crash rate than similar interstate corridors, and there is a high potential for reduction in the frequency of severe crashes. More recent data from 2021-2023 found that 62 percent of the project corridor (MP 218.00-northern terminus MP 221.45) was at or above LOSS IV for total crashes (CDOT 2025c).

2.1.6 Transit Safety

An RTD transit station, the Thornton Park-n-Ride, is located in the project limits just south of 88th Avenue. The Park-n-Ride has locations on the east and west side of I-25, with 435 parking spaces and 600 parking spaces, respectively. Each side has bike racks and bike lockers. The station serves RTD's Express Bus route 120X, limited route 93L, and local route 92. Of these, Route 120X is the only route that uses I-25. Currently, Route 120X buses service the Thornton Park-n-Ride on a 15-minute frequency during peak hours and on 30- to 60-minute frequencies at other times of day.

The existing station access from I-25 causes safety and operations issues for transit. Route 120X buses traveling on I-25 access the Park-n-Ride via bus-only exit ramps, also called slip ramps, on the outside lanes of the highway. Because buses travel in the Express Lanes, which are on the inside of the highway, buses need to move across four lanes of traffic to travel between the Express Lanes and the slip ramps. These lane changes create safety concerns and slow traffic as buses merge across the four lanes.

In the southbound direction, the highway lacks a southbound deceleration lane for buses exiting I-25 to access the Park-n-Ride; rapidly decelerating buses in this location create a safety hazard and contribute to congestion for vehicles travelling in the outside southbound lanes. In the northbound direction, the uphill grade on I-25 limits bus acceleration speeds as they leave the Park-n-Ride and merge back into high-speed traffic on I-25, which contributes to congestion and safety issues in this location. RTD buses have also been observed stopping or staging on the highway shoulder near the slip ramps, preventing vehicles from accessing the shoulder in this location.

The underpass of I-25 at the Park-n-Ride, which is 135 feet long, 11.5 feet tall, and 44 feet wide, serves as both the pedestrian connection between the east and west sides of the Park-n-Ride and as the Niver Creek Trail crossing beneath I-25. The Niver Creek Trail is a 2.5-mile,10-foot wide trail connecting Pecos Park at 96th Avenue and Pecos Street to 84th Avenue and Grant Street. People using the underpass must cross the bus lanes, which are not signal-controlled, meaning there is no traffic signal that halts bus traffic and signals pedestrians and bicyclists to cross.

2.2 Improve Traffic Operations

I-25 between US 36 and 104th Avenue regularly experiences extreme and prolonged congestion resulting from high traffic volumes and near-daily incidents, such as crashes, work zones, and inclement weather, which impacts both passenger and commercial freight vehicle travel. Recurring congestion is observed repeatedly during peak travel periods at predictable locations and results from high traffic volumes and from physical conditions that reduce travel speeds, such as the increase in grade as I-25 climbs north from 84th Avenue.

2.2.1 Traffic Congestion

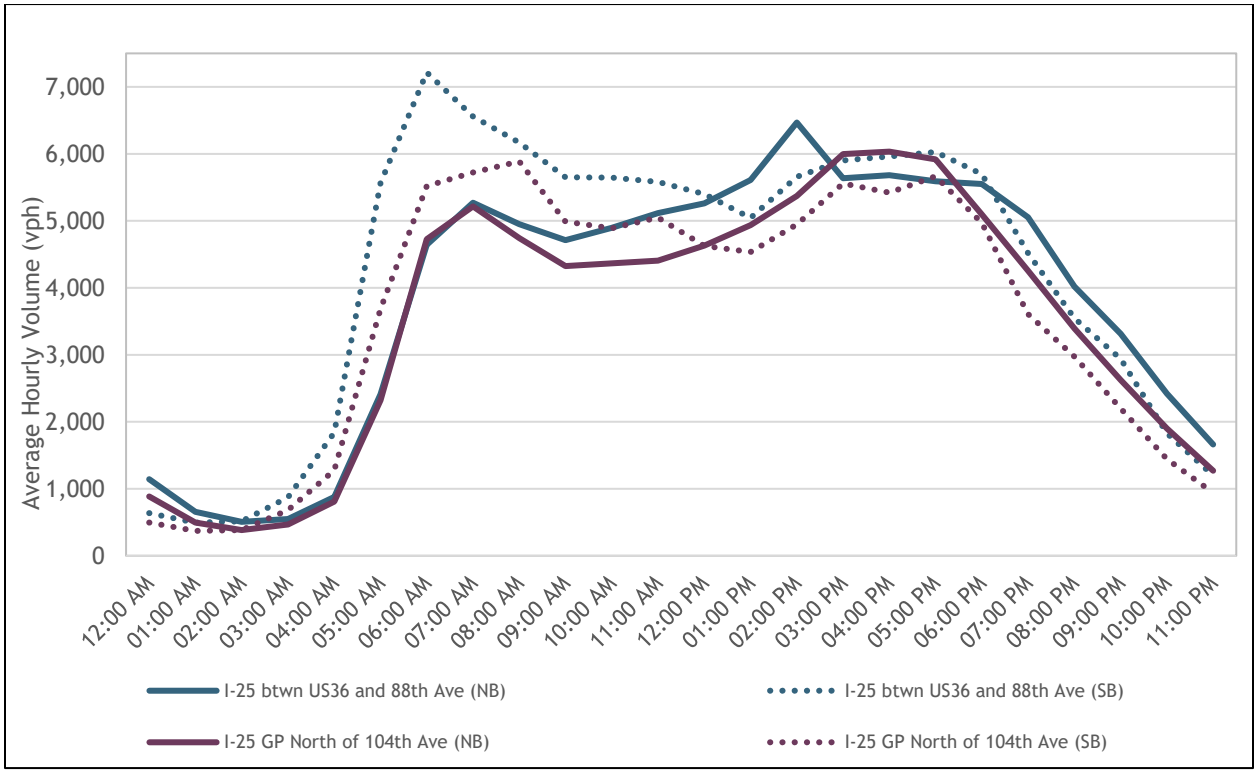
Traffic data discussed in this section was observed primarily in 2024 within the traffic modeling area, which is defined as along I-25 from just south of 58th Avenue to north of 104th Avenue, west of Pecos Street on US 36 and I-76, and east of York Street on I-76 and I-270.

Traffic incidents, which are unplanned events such as vehicle collisions or breakdowns, lead to and worsen congestion. Between May 1, 2023 and May 31, 2024, traffic incidents occurred on 95 percent of the total days (363 of 383 days). Of the 1,133 incidents within the review period, 39 percent or 437 incidents impacted northbound traffic and 61 percent or 696 incidents impacted southbound traffic. Further information on this analysis can be found in the **I-25 US 36 to 104th Avenue Cluster Analysis Memorandum** (CDOT 2024a).

In 2024, traffic volumes in the general-purpose lanes ranged from 170,000 vehicles per day (vpd) at the north end of the project area to 233,000 vpd at the south end. Congestion already occurs nearly every day within this segment of the I-25 corridor. By 2050, the traffic is expected to range from around 225,000 vpd to 265,000 vpd, which will worsen congestion if no improvements are made.

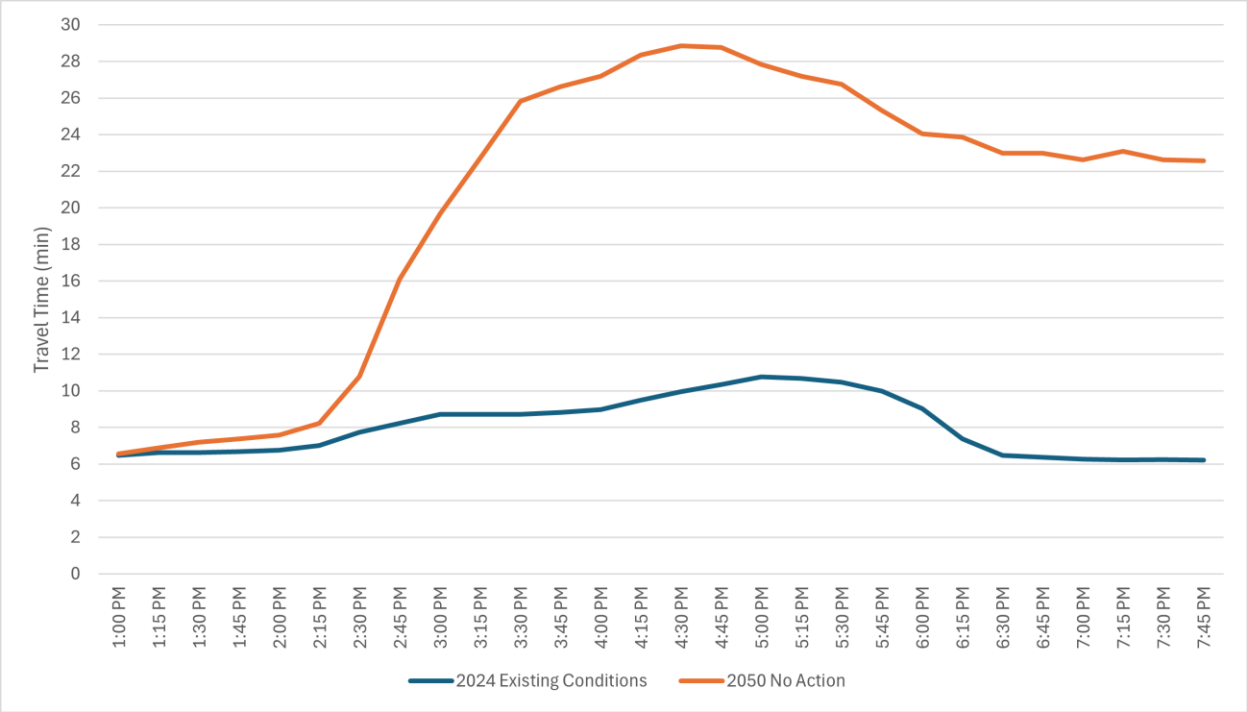
As shown in **Figure 9**, the highest traffic volumes occur during weekdays in the morning in the southbound direction and in the evening in the northbound direction. Volumes are inclusive of both the general-purpose lanes and HOV/Express Lanes except for the count location north of 104th Avenue, which only reflects general-purpose lane volumes. The morning peak period occurred between 6:00 AM and 9:00 AM, and the evening peak period occurred between 2:00 PM and 7:00 PM. Further discussions on the data collected can be found in the **I-25 US 36 to 104th Avenue Traffic Data Collection and Analysis Memorandum** (CDOT 2024b).

Figure 9. Weekday Average Hourly Traffic Flows on I-25 (2024)



The northbound evening peak period congestion is projected to substantially worsen by year 2050, with congestion starting around 2:00 PM and still not resolving by 8:00 PM (see **Figure 10**). This period of congestion is projected to lead to exponential increases in travel times, with existing travel times between south of 88th Avenue and north of 104th Avenue averaging around 40 minutes between 4:00 PM and 6:00 PM, which is approximately four times longer than free flow travel conditions.

Figure 10. PM Peak Period Northbound I-25 General-Purpose Travel Times (South of 70th Avenue to North of 104th Avenue)



Congestion occurs in two key areas under current existing conditions: on I-25 between the US 36/I-76/I-270 interchange and 84th Avenue and on I-25 between 84th Avenue and Thornton Parkway. Traffic congestion is expected to worsen substantially by 2050 in these areas, described below, if no improvements are made.

US 36/I-76/I-270 Interchange to 84th Avenue Interchange

Merging traffic coming from US 36, I-76, and I-270 all enter northbound I-25 at approximately the same location. Slowing is observed around the merge area from I-270 (south of 84th Avenue) where a standing queue often forms and extends south towards 70th Avenue. Additionally, once on I-25, the vehicles entering from US 36 and I-270 must quickly merge left before the combined US 36 and I-270 on-ramp lane ends. The combination of multiple on-ramps in short succession, a 4 percent climbing grade, and managed lane weaving movements around the US 36/I-76/I-270 interchange results in consistent slowing on I-25. Immediately north of this interchange, the lane-drop at 84th Avenue creates a bottleneck effect in the northbound direction that also contributes to congestion. This area is prone to congestion during both the morning and evening peak period, with evening congestion being more severe.

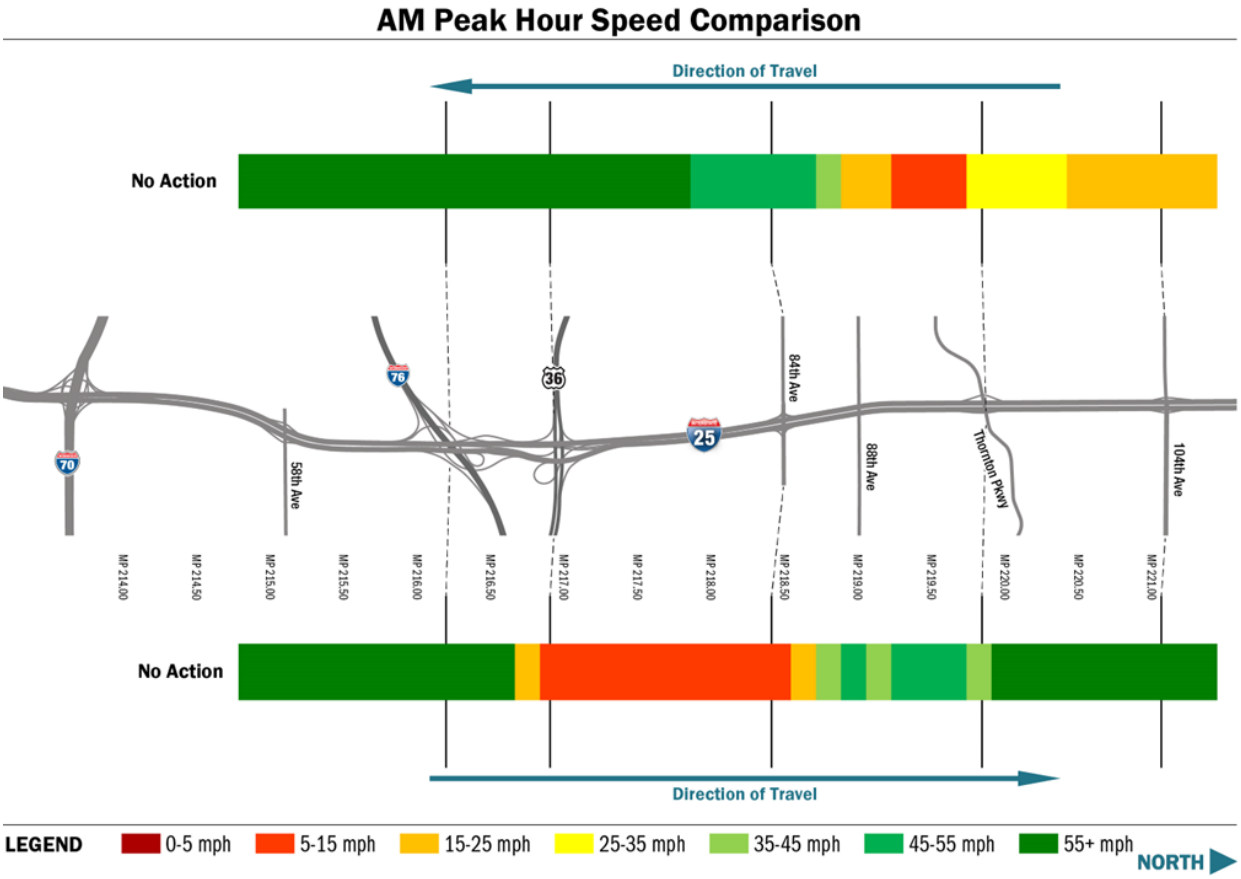
84th Avenue Interchange to Thornton Parkway

In the southbound direction, traffic merging onto mainline I-25 from the Thornton Parkway interchange results in a bottleneck congestion effect that will worsen with the increasing

traffic demand projected into the year 2050. This area is particularly prone to congestion during the morning peak period.

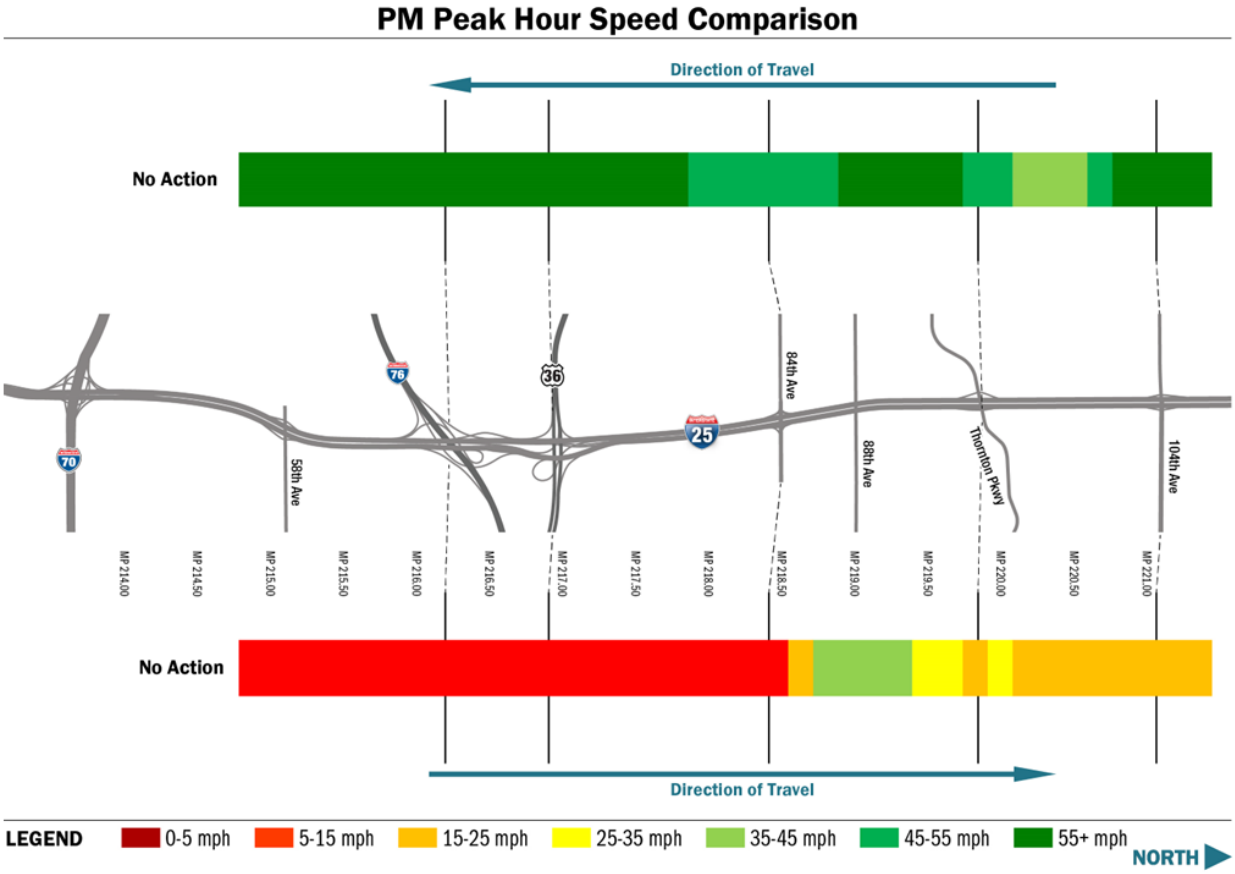
Figure 11 and **Figure 12** show projected speeds derived from microsimulation traffic modeling along mainline I-25 under the 2050 No Action scenario during the morning and evening peak periods, respectively.

Figure 11. I-25 Mainline Speeds in No Action Year 2050: Morning Peak Hour



Note: Different colors indicate uneven speeds (stop and go traffic).

Figure 12. I-25 Mainline Speeds in No Action Year 2050: Evening Peak Hour

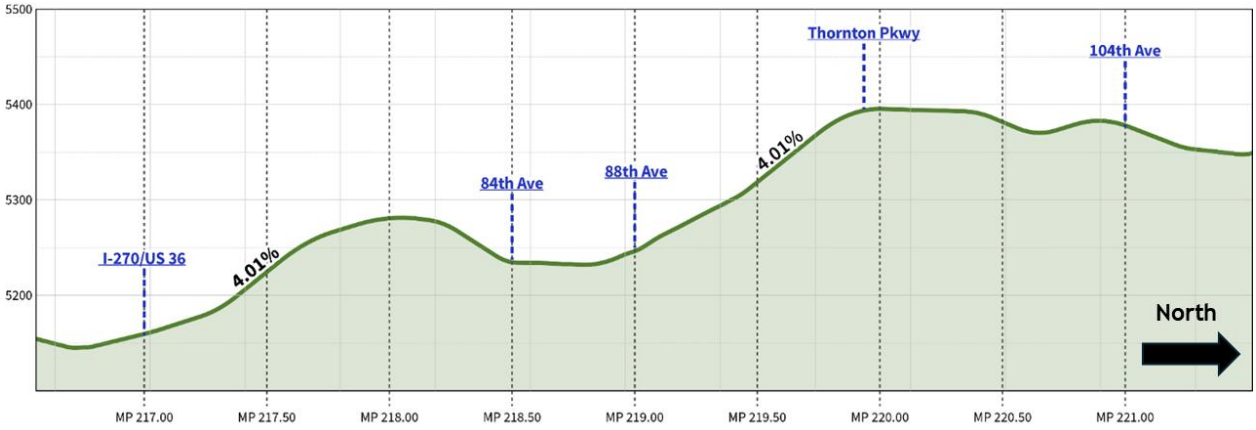


Note: Different colors indicate uneven speeds (stop and go traffic).

2.2.2 Freight Operations

I-25 is a primary freight corridor in Colorado, and CDOT's Online Transportation Information System (OTIS) Traffic Data Explorer estimated truck percentages on I-25 within the project corridor were around 10 percent of AADT in 2023 (CDOT 2023a). Truck percentages are generally higher along I-270 and I-76 and lower along US 36 as compared to I-25. Slow speeds, lane closures, and congestion on I-25 affect the ability of freight carriers to deliver goods efficiently and on time. The uphill grade on northbound I-25 from 84th Avenue to 104th Avenue, illustrated in **Figure 13**, impacts the ability for heavy trucks entering I-25 to accelerate to I-25 travel speeds making it difficult to merge with traffic, creating additional slow-downs and further increasing congestion.

Figure 13. I-25 Vertical Roadway Profile



2.3 Conclusion

The I-25 corridor between US 36 and 104th Avenue is a critical regional connection that currently experiences severe congestion, a high frequency of crashes, and recurring operational challenges that affect both safety and mobility. Analysis of recent safety and traffic data demonstrates that existing conditions have high crash rates and inconsistent travel speeds caused by congestion, steep grades, and merging activity. These issues are expected to worsen by 2050 as travel demand continues to increase; therefore, the project is necessary to address critical safety deficiencies and improve traffic operations within this heavily traveled corridor. Overall, the project will advance CDOT's mission to improve safety, efficiency, and multimodal connectivity along one of Colorado's most important transportation corridors.

3.0 References

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