

**Paper:** Colorado Springs Independent

**Date:** Thursday, October 2, 2008

## A rail solution

### **Public response could determine the future of passenger trains**

No one knows when or if it will happen.

But a lot of leaders along the Front Range want to move coal train traffic to the eastern plains, at least 60 miles east of the mountains, and use the tracks that cut through Colorado's biggest population centers for passenger rail.

"The more we look at this from a planning perspective, the more benefits we see," says Dave Mentor, Colorado Springs' transit planning supervisor.

Two feasibility studies are in the works: one examining passenger rail, the other looking at relocating those coal trains to new tracks. Both are preliminary — any project is likely years, if not decades, away — but they will help the Colorado Department of Transportation determine whether the idea is worth pursuing further.

CDOT is currently hosting public meetings across the state, including in Colorado Springs, and asking people what they think of relocating coal trains. But there's a good chance you've never heard of these meetings or these plans. City Councilwoman Jan Martin says Colorado Springs leaders have been waiting to see the studies before they make a big hullabaloo, "so we have something to really rally people with."

Problem is, CDOT continues to collect public feedback. So far, it's hearing a lot more from farmers and ranchers on the eastern plains who hate the idea, than it's hearing from Front Range commuters who love the possibilities.

CDOT says they'll take those public comments seriously. And — this is important — if, for whatever reason, the agency decides against moving the coal trains east, you can kiss the passenger rail idea goodbye.

Sayonara, snarl?

"The only way we'll ever really get passenger rail, through an economic stance, is to use the current rails," Doug Lehnen says.

He should know. In addition to his duties as mayor pro-tem of Castle Rock, Lehnen is vice chair of Rocky Mountain Rail Authority, a governmental body comprised of more than 40 Colorado counties, cities, towns and entities (including Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak Rural Transportation Authority), whose sole purpose is to oversee the study of passenger rail along Interstates 25 and 70.

That study is set to be released in mid-2009. It will answer many questions, such as: How fast could a passenger train travel along the old tracks? How many people are likely to ride it? How would it impact traffic congestion and air pollution? And, perhaps most importantly, what's the price tag?

But the planning could be for naught if CDOT doesn't continue to pursue a private-public partnership with the railroads that will get the coal trains — most of them headed to Texas utilities — the hell out of Dodge.

A 2005 CDOT public benefits-and-cost study noted that the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. and the Union Pacific Railroad Co. would benefit from moving. They'd get brand-new tracks that would avoid mountains and urban centers, allowing for greater speed and efficiency.

Front Range motorists, the study added, would see fewer delays at railroad crossings, improved air quality, less noise and vibration, job creation, urban redevelopment, fewer train-vehicle accidents, reduced risks from terrorists and hazardous spills, and, of course, an opportunity for passenger rail travel.

The study estimated that relocation would cost \$1.05 to \$1.52 billion in 2004 dollars, but said the benefits outweigh the costs. The railroads have said they'd pay for at least part of the relocation.

CDOT will release a second study, "Rail Relocations for Colorado Communities" (or R2C2), in early 2009. It will attempt to pin down the costs better, determine who should pay for what in a private-public partnership and where the government money will come from (the other big quandary), and outline a strategy to obtain environmental clearances. But it won't say exactly where the new rail will go.

#### Train game

Meanwhile, sensing the looming shadow of a Trojan horse, the people of the eastern plains have rallied.

Scott Ravenkamp, a farmer with 6,000 acres just outside Hugo, is vice chair of Citizens Against Railroad Relocation, a group organized to oppose moving coal trains east.

Ravenkamp says he sees no benefit to the eastern communities. Instead, he says, the Front Range would be relocating its problems, and adding headaches for the east such as lost land and profits, and decreased property values. Depending on where tracks go, he notes, some families could lose their homes.

"It's going to affect our counties; it's going to affect our school districts; it's going to affect our fire districts," Ravenkamp says. "It's not a win-win-win deal for us."

People like Ravenkamp have crowded meetings in the east, drawing around 80 people to one gathering, about twice as many as the best-attended meetings on the Front Range.

All that citizen action could greatly delay, though probably not derail, projects, says Bob Wilson, spokesman for CDOT.

"You definitely want a buy-in," he says. "It's not something that it doesn't matter what people say."

By J. Adrian Stanley