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Study: Benefits of rerouting freight trains across plains outweigh costs

Shifting railroad freight trains out of the Interstate 25 corridor along the Front Range, to a new alignment on Colorado's eastern plains, would cost between \$797 million and nearly \$1.2 billion, according to a study issued Tuesday by the Colorado Department of Transportation.

But the benefits of the proposed bypass would be between \$971.2 million and \$1.5 billion, depending on which of two alignments is chosen, according to the "Colorado Rail Relocation Implementation Study."

More studies are needed on the proposal, the report concluded. The further studies will:

- Refine the engineering of the proposed alignments;
- Look at community and environmental impacts on the plains;
- Consider converting the existing freight railroad lines between Denver and Pueblo to intercity passenger rail use;
- Figure out where the construction money might come from.

At issue is what to do about the roughly 30 freight trains per day that chug along rail lines down the middle of Denver, most of them hauling coal from Wyoming down to power plants in Texas.

As they move along a 300-mile route from Brush northeast of Denver to Las Animas in southeastern Colorado, the trains tie up vehicle traffic as they move, and cause delays for other trains waiting to get in and out of Denver.

CDOT's study said building a bypass would drop the number of trains passing through Denver from 30 or 31 per day to about 13, serving local industries and shippers. There would be fewer delays for those 13 trains because the heavy coal trains would be out of the way, the study said.

Shifting the trains away from the Interstate 25 corridor would have several advantages, the study said.

Among them:

- The railroads would have shorter, more direct routes for trains running between Wyoming's coal fields and Texas power plants;
- There would be less noise, delays and emissions from cars and trains by shifting the trains out of Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo;
- Operating costs would be lower for the railroads;

· There would be more room for growth in passenger rail in and out of Denver.

Money for building new rail lines, part of both alignments studied, would likely come from public-private partnerships, the study said.

Possible partners include the state and federal governments, the railroads, their investors, shippers on the railroads such as the coal companies and utilities, and local governments, the study said.

Also up for discussion is converting the existing rail line between Denver and Pueblo to commuter rail, something CDOT has said "is a priority" and is being studied by the **Rocky Mountain Rail Authority**, according to the study.

The majority of trains rerouted to the bypass would be coal trains operated by the **Burlington Northern Santa Fe** Railroad (BNSF) (NYSE: BNI), based in Fort Worth, Texas.

Currently, the loaded BNSF coal trains that start in Wyoming travel from Brush through Denver toward Pueblo and Las Animas and on to Texas.

The study looked at two routes, termed Alignment A and Alignment B between Brush and Las Animas.

Alignment A is a 220-mile proposed route that would cost an estimated \$797 million. Alignment A calls for sending trains from Brush to near Strasburg along Interstate 70 using existing and tracks, then along existing tracks south to the existing **Union Pacific** Limon station between Byers and Peoria, where the trains would use the existing Union Pacific route to another point just east of Las Animas.

A second route, the 178-mile Alignment B, calls for building a new track between Brush and Las Animas at a cost of nearly \$1.2 billion.

A new connection allowing train movement through Trinidad in southern Colorado was included in both alignment studies.

The study recommended creating a Citizens Advisory Group for citizens to work with CDOT on the potential relocation of rail lines to eastern Colorado. More detailed studies are also needed on the benefits and impacts of a new rail line on Colorado's agriculture industry and plains communities.