

**Paper:** FORT COLLINS: NOW  
**Date:** Friday, February 13, 2009

## **Train Study Won't Help Fort Collins**

**By Rebecca Boyle**

A nearly two-year study on the possibility of moving railroad freight traffic away from the Front Range says it might help ease congestion on rail lines, freeing them for use by commuters.

But it seems Fort Collins and Greeley won't get much relief.

The Colorado Department of Transportation completed a \$1.75 million study this week that was designed to help CDOT and the state's two largest rail companies determine the feasibility of moving freight trains out to the eastern plains, bypassing the busy Denver and Front Range corridor.

The trains using a bypass route would primarily be coal trains headed from Wyoming to Texas, however. Trains that run down Mason Street in Fort Collins and near 7th Avenue in Greeley wouldn't be affected.

Bob Wilson, a spokesman for CDOT, said the study examined two possible alignments that would move trains to the eastern plains.

"Even though there would be a diverting of the majority of that heavy traffic off the Front Range, there would still be train traffic," he said.

That's because freight trains make some stops at power plants and other places in Denver.

Currently, coal trains come down from Wyoming's Powder River Basin, home to vast coal reserves, and into Fort Morgan and Brush. They follow the stretch from Interstate 76 into Denver, and go south along the Front Range to Pueblo. The trains then travel east through Oklahoma and down to power plants in Texas.

Two possible realignments wouldn't put the trains any further east than Brush, so the populous Front Range could be avoided.

Alignment A, which would cost at least \$797 million, would send trains from Brush to Limon, then on to an existing section near La Junta, and further on to Las Animas. It uses some existing spurs and would require the construction of some new sections of track.

Alignment B, which has a \$1.12 billion price tag, would be an all-new train track. BNSF Railway helped develop the plan based on ideal operating grades and track curvature, according to CDOT. It would require building a new line from Brush to Las Animas.

The existing route requires trains to traverse about 300 miles of track, forming a "C" shape through the state from east to west and back again.

Alignment A uses about 220 miles, and Alignment B is about 180 miles long.

"That amounts to significant savings to the railroads in time," Wilson said.

Either realignment would also mean reduced crossing delays, noise and emissions in Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

But what about Fort Collins?

The BNSF line that runs along Mason Street carries trains that come down from Cheyenne, rather than eastern Wyoming, so it would require substantial new construction to move those trains all the way to Brush.

What's more, BNSF owns a right-of-way along Mason Street, thanks to Fort Collins' founders, who wanted the railroad to help the fledgling town grow in 1870.

Wilson said there's long been talk about relocating the downtown train, but it's a long way from reality.

"The railroads are in essence saying, 'If you want to move the tracks, it's your dime,'" he said. "They were there first."

The results of the feasibility study are also a long way from reality. Wilson noted that more studies would have to happen before either realignment would be recommended.

"They looked at a variety of things but nothing that is written in stone," he said. "This is still a study at this point."