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Out of town on the rails Plan moves freight on tracks out east to make room for a commuter system

It took mighty, steel-drivin' men to build railroad tracks along Colorado's Front Range in the 19th century.

It might take manicured money men and smoothtalking negotiators to relocate them in the 21st.

That's the inescapable fact confronting the state's Transportation Department and two major railroads as they look at an idea a lot of people find appealing: moving up to 85 percent of the throughbound freight trains that now rumble through Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo to new tracks far out on the eastern plains.

The idea intrigues transit experts, including those from Fort Carson and Colorado Springs' transit system, Mountain Metro.

That's because taking most of those slow-moving trains off the tracks is critical if a commuter rail system is to be created along the Front Range.

For others, relocating freight trains eastward promises shorter waits at railroad crossings, reduced air pollution and some peace and quiet for those living near tracks.

Still, a lot of factors could derail an eastern freight line: a big price tag and who will pay it; disagreements between the railroads over the best eastern freight route; extensive environmental studies; and initial resistance by some rural residents concerned about the impacts to their lives.

Idea surfaced in '70s

During the past 30 years, an increasing number of trains passing through Colorado have been carrying coal to Texas from the Powder River Basin mines in northeast Wyoming. There really is no need for those trains to travel along the state's foothills and through its most populous cities, experts say.

In the 1970s, the seven railroads then operating in Colorado approached the state about creating an eastern freight route, but conflicting interests among the railroads doomed that effort.

In 2002, the state initiated a far more ambitious effort that looked at an eastern rail route but also relocating freight terminals and improvements to railroad junctions.

The plan's complexity and price tag - more than \$1 billion - scuttled that plan. Instead, the railroads asked the state to concentrate on a potential eastern rail route.

The latest effort is built on a 2005 study from the previous effort that concluded the economic and social benefits of an eastern freight route to the state far outweigh its costs.

It's too soon to say if the latest effort will result in trains running up and down the plains, said project manager Tammy Lang of the Colorado Department of Transportation.

There are, she and others said, daunting challenges:

Although the number of major railroads in the state has been reduced from seven to two since the failed 1979 effort, those two railroads - Union Pacific and BNSF - favor different train routes now being considered. Both alternate routes avoid Denver and generally head south from Brush and join up with existing tracks at Las Animas.

And the cost of relocating the trains - although down from the \$1.1 billion envisioned in the more ambitious plan in 2002 and 2003 - would still be \$500 million or so.

There is talk of a public-private partnership to pay that cost, but so far none of the parties is saying how much they'd be willing to contribute.

But a consultant working for CDOT on the latest proposal, Randy Grauberger of the Denver-based consulting firm Parsons Brinckerhoff, thinks there may be new momentum for an eastern freight train route.

Coal-train traffic continues to increase, and the two railroads are interested in getting it to its destination more efficiently and at less cost. If the trains aren't moved east soon, urban growth could someday spread far enough to preclude that possibility, he said.

And there is external pressure on the railroads: With the cost of gas soaring and traffic congestion increasing, there is increasing interest in creating a commuter rail system along the Front Range.

"The state certainly has a more pro-passenger rail attitude than three or four years ago," Grauberger said.

A growing number of states - including neighbors New Mexico and Utah - are building passenger rail systems, many on tracks once used by freight trains.

In fact, there is a study under way that looks at the feasibility of commuter rail lines along the Interstate 70 and Interstate 25 corridors in Colorado.

A transportation plan for the Pikes Peak region approved this spring also envisions commuter rail service, possibly from Pueblo to Fountain, Fort Carson, Woodmen Road and on to the [Air Force Academy](#), eventually linking to rail service from Denver, said David Menter, transit planning supervisor of Mountain Metropolitan Transit.

Moving most freight trains off existing lines in this region would open up capacity for those commuter trains, he said.

Fort Carson also is excited about the possibilities if freight rail traffic is relocated, said Richard Orphan, who works in the traffic Engineering Department on the post.

With about 17,500 troops stationed at Carson and another 12,500 expected by 2013, the post is looking at a variety of ways to get soldiers "out of their cars," Orphan said.

Light rail would make affordable housing in Fountain and Pueblo more accessible to soldiers, and there would be "tremendous advantages to reducing vehicles on post," he said.

Under the plan being studied, local-delivery trains, including those that carry coal from western Colorado mines to Colorado Springs' two coal-fired power plants, would continue to use Front Range tracks.

Still, even using the most conservative estimate, removing through-traffic trains would cut the 29 or so trains that pass through Colorado Springs each day to 14, and possibly fewer. If the latest proposal fails, 34 trains per day could pass through the city by 2030, according to a 2005 study

by the state and a consultant that came out of the previous attempt to relocate tracks away from the Front Range.

Reaction mixed

Over the past few weeks, Parsons Brinckerhoff consultants hired by the state have been explaining the proposal and taking public comments at meetings in small towns likely to be affected by the relocation of tracks.

Grauberger said the reaction has been mixed. There were no negative comments from residents in Brush, a northeast Colorado town bracketed by the two proposed rail routes. Limon city officials were excited about the possibility of an I-70-railroad hub near their town and the jobs that could create. But the rural folks living in the Haswell area, near the southern terminus of the two proposed routes, were upset.

"They had real concerns about Front Range folks sending all their problems to them. They didn't care about passenger service," he said.

Still, with the rail alignments tentative and a lot of environmental studies to do before a track is laid, the consultant didn't see hurdles that couldn't be overcome.

Except one: the railroads themselves. Union Pacific favors one alignment, called A, which is a bit longer than the other proposal but consists of some portions of track owned by the railroad. That alignment would require BNSF to pay Union Pacific for using the tracks.

BNSF prefers alignment B, which would require new track but would be shorter by 42 miles.

And, Grauberger said, because the bulk of freight traffic in Colorado is carried by BNSF, it would presumably own the tracks.

The alignments shave 80 to 122 miles off the trains' current route down the Front Range, and both negate the need for a slow, fuel-guzzling, polluting climb up the Palmer Divide.

Grauberger said building either alignment would require public money - maybe lots - and neither railroad wants that used to give their competitor an advantage in moving coal.

Lang said CDOT and consultants are exploring state and federal funding that might be available and will approach Colorado utilities and Texas coal companies about how much they'd be willing to contribute to the project.

The state and consultants will issue a final report in November that will include a preferred track alignment and how much it will cost to create it.

She expects the railroads and the state will decide soon after whether such a route becomes reality or just remains a good idea.

Said consultant Grauberger: "Hopefully, it can all come together."

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More about the proposed relocation of Front Range railroad freight traffic to the eastern plains: www.dot.state.co.us/railroadstudy/default.asp