

Southwest Chief Thru-Car Alternatives Analysis: Governance Options Memorandum

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1.0 Introduction and Background

The purpose of this memorandum is an overview of governance options for the recommended passenger rail alternative between Pueblo and La Junta. The team has coordinated within Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and with Amtrak, Front Range Passenger Rail District (FRPRD), and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to inform options and potential next steps. Discussion of whether a state-supported or long-distance service extension model would be more suitable is described in Section 3.0.

Resulting from the Alternatives Analysis process, two daily round trip trains between Pueblo and the existing station in La Junta have been recommended. The ‘SWC Connector’ service schedule would be linked to the daily eastbound and westbound *Southwest Chief* scheduled arrivals in La Junta. The recommended investment option includes improvements for capacity and safety upgrades which would total \$240M and \$3M per year in capital and operations & maintenance costs, respectively. Ridership would be primarily generated by travelers who choose to disembark the *Southwest Chief* in La Junta to utilize the SWC Connector service to Pueblo (and points north) and ultimately return to La Junta to continue their journey on the *Southwest Chief*. In-state ridership forecast projected about 2 passengers per day would utilize the SWC Connector service. In an approximated overall ridership approach, described in detail within **Section 5.2** of the Service Planning and Engineering Report, yearly SWC Connector ridership could be up to 44,250 travelers. Considering capital and operating costs for the service, and limited ridership, CDOT, FRPRD and Amtrak have acknowledged that thruway bus connections could be a more appropriate investment compared to the SWC Connector service studied in this CRISI grant. The following sections discuss existing and potential entities which could be an option to govern a SWC Connector service.

2.0 Front Range Passenger Rail District

The FRPRD is an independent government agency with the mission to plan, design, finance, construct, operate, and maintain a new passenger rail system along Colorado’s Front Range. The district extends spans portions or the entirety of the 13 counties near I-25 and can be seen in Figure 1. The district is governed by a Board of Directors and has the authority to levy taxes, through ballot measures, to fund and support rail programs, including establishing station area improvement districts.

FRPRD boundaries were set when it was established by the Colorado legislature. The recommended alternative for this study, focused on service and improvements between Pueblo and La Junta, is outside of the current district boundary. It would take an act of the Colorado legislature to change the boundary – currently, this is not a reasonable option for FRPRD as its primary focus and

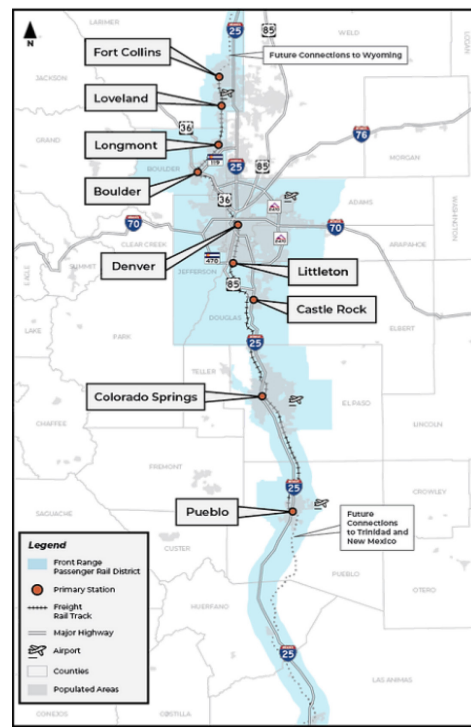


Figure 1. FRPRD Boundary

function is developing the ‘spine’ of Front Range Passenger Rail service. Colorado Senate Bill 21-238, which created the FRPRD, requires collaboration with Amtrak to explore rerouting of the *Southwest Chief* through Pueblo. However, this grant was awarded to examine a branch service configuration, rather than a re-route of the *Southwest Chief*. Before governance strategy/partnership opportunities could be explored in detail, further coordination with Amtrak and other stakeholders is needed to examine costs and benefits of alternative option(s) to connecting the *Southwest Chief* and future Front Range Passenger Rail.

3.0 Amtrak

Amtrak (National Railroad Passenger Corporation) is a federally chartered corporation, with the Board of Directors appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

Amtrak has an existing governance structure for its family of services and currently operates the *Southwest Chief*. To date, coordination and results-sharing between the study team and Amtrak has not resulted in future commitment to the SWC Connector service as studied. As mentioned in the introduction, cost and limited ridership outlook are challenges which have led to Amtrak supporting a future thruway bus service study. Amtrak maintains that straightforward connection between the *Southwest Chief* and future Front Range Passenger Rail would benefit both services, however, the SWC Connector service as studied may not be the most cost-effective configuration. As studied, the SWC Connector service would likely fall into a state-supported category. Due to the cost and ridership limitations, Amtrak would not likely take on SWC Connector service as a through-car extension to the *Southwest Chief* long-distance service.

Related to long distance service planning, the FRA has recently published a study of potential new long-distance train services in the United States. This study evaluated options for restored or new daily long distance routes. Preferred routes that go through southern Colorado are Denver to Houston, and El Paso to Billings. Both utilize Pueblo – Trinidad as the routing option, which could be a future consideration for Amtrak and Front Range Passenger Rail and any potential evaluation of re-routing the *Southwest Chief* through Pueblo and along the Pueblo – Trinidad segment. Amtrak acknowledged they would be willing to work with Colorado and FRA to understand how to advance these potential long distance corridors.

Attached in **Appendix A** is a white paper and attachments which Amtrak reviewed and responded to comment requests. The white paper solicited comments on potential next steps for connecting the *Southwest Chief* with future Front Range Passenger Rail.

3.0 Regional Transportation Authority

Under Colorado law, governmental entities can join to create a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). This is done to address transportation needs within a geographic region. RTAs are permitted to establish, collect, and increase or decrease tolls, rates, and charges to finance a transportation system. In addition, RTAs can levy sales taxes, impose an annual motor vehicle registration fee, levy a visitor benefit tax, impose a uniform mill levy, establish regional transportation activity enterprises, and issue bonds.

RTAs have the authority to finance, construct, operate, and/or maintain regional transportation systems. RTAs must be governed by a board of directors with at least five elected officials from the members of the represented governments and must include at least one elected official from each member. To establish an RTA, the combination of governments seeking to create it must submit their contract establishing the RTA to the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) for review and comment, as well as to any affected public highway authority, county or municipality that borders the proposed RTA. No municipality, county, or special district may enter a contract establishing an RTA without holding at least two public hearings. To take effect, a contract must be approved by voters within the boundaries of the proposed district.

As a relevant example of this type of governance structure, Routt County, the City of Steamboat Springs, and the City of Craig are currently studying a potential Yampa Valley Regional Transportation Authority. Southern Colorado stakeholders could pursue an option like this to better organize and understand whether an RTA would help to advance transportation connections that can benefit the region.

4.0 Conclusion

In closing, governance options exist for a future passenger rail connection between Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* and future Front Range Passenger Rail. Further study of the most cost-effective service configuration is required for governance strategies and/or governance partnerships to be explored in detail.