ColoRail proposes simpler, less costly solution:

Passengers neglected in planning

“This is really not a real estate project, it’s a transit project first, and a civic asset, a civic amenity project a close second,” Tom Gougeon, Principal of Continuum East-West Partners. Referring to development plans for Denver Union Station. Rocky Mountain News, September 8, 2006.

The redevelopment of Denver Union Station (DUS) may have started out emphasizing transit first and “civic amenities” second, but what has evolved, in the opinion of ColoRail, is a project driven by real estate development interests which seriously neglects the interests of the transit patron.

Specifically, ColoRail objects to the placement of the light rail station on the Consolidated Main Line (CML) two blocks or five hundred feet from the commuter rail platforms. Citizen’s who voted for the FasTracks initiative in 2004 were promised all major modes of transportation would connect at DUS and this was also a central feature of the DUS Master Plan as well.

The developers are now recommending that RTD’s regional bus station which was to be placed underground parallel to the commuter rail tracks be turned 90 degrees and buried beneath 17th St. so a moving walkway through the bus station can be constructed to connect the proposed light rail station with commuter rail platforms. There is no question this is a creative idea, however the transfer time is still lengthy.

Another part of the redevelopment plan that ColoRail opposes is placement of commuter rail below grade so that 18th Street can become a through street and not be blocked by railroad tracks and station platforms.

ColoRail believes that the expense, (Continued on page 6)
“Its slow strangulation. You don’t notice it but it will eventually strangle you.” These were the comments of Denver Manager of Public Works, Bill Vidal to a gathering of political and business leaders on January 26. No, he wasn’t talking about the paralysis of Denver area streets caused by compacted snow and ice, he was referring to the diminishing ability of state and local governments to pay for road maintenance and construction to keep up with Colorado’s growing population.

The meeting was sponsored by Transportation Solutions, a non-profit organization which promotes road and transit improvements on South University and South Colorado Boulevards as well as at the Cherry Creek Shopping Center area.

Mr. Vidal estimated that the Denver Metro area will require about $15 billion in funding for roads by 2030 to take care of an additional estimated 1.3 million residents. Even with the recent addition of T-REX, population increase, vehicle ownership and travel has significantly outpaced new road construction. In the past decade, Metro Denver has grown some 30-40% while total lane miles has increased 5%. He estimated that there will be a 35% increase in personal trips by 2030 and added that 60% of all current trips by automobile come in and out of Denver each day supporting the notion that travel congestion is fundamentally a regional problem.

Regional models which measure traffic movement demonstrate a leveling off of roadway congestion around 2015 due mainly to the anticipated completion of FasTracks, however, by 2030, highway congestion will once again reach severe levels with a predicted increase in personal trips of 35%. Even though FasTracks design has just barely begun, Mr. Vidal recommended that an additional “Next Tracks Plan” be initiated soon. “We need to find a way of handling the distribution of people than just building for the car,” he concluded.

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Dr. Adams reviewed her FasTracks study which concluded that a good system of rail transit:

1.) Decreases congestion 
2.) Increases travel options 
3.) Allows high-density development 
4.) Provides fast and reliable travel during inclement weather 
5.) Makes a city a more desirable place to live 
6.) Maintains quality of life while allowing for growth 
7.) Reduces the tendency for cities to sprawl 
8.) Creates growth of more clustered development 
9.) Reduces needs for city services and improves tax base 
10.) Improves rundown neighborhoods

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as subsidies flow to autos

11.) Improves air and water quality
12.) Encourages more walking and biking (healthful exercise)
13.) Provides greater travel safety
14.) Provides for greater mobility for seniors, low-income workers, and students
15.) Reduces needs for parking and allows land to be used for more productive purposes
16.) Reduces oil dependency
17.) Creates construction jobs

When it comes to developing a more transit friendly environment, volunteerism isn’t going to do it. There have to be economic incentives to accomplish this goal Dr. Adams claimed. Her formula: Raise gas taxes significantly, charge a “congestion tax” to discourage travel to the center city, and build an attractive and comprehensive rapid transit system which can provide trip speeds that are competitive with automobile drive times.

Joint Spring meeting set with Colorado Rail Association

This Spring, ColoRail will meet jointly with the Colorado Rail Association on Saturday, June 9th at 9:00 a.m. at the Arapahoe County Fairgrounds. “Transit Oriented Development” will be the theme of the event, with presentations and exhibits to show what is being done and to show what can be done.

At-the-door registration, beginning at 8:30 a.m., will be $20.00, with an early registration fee of $15.00. For more information, check the Colorado Rail Association’s website at: http://www.rangerxpress.com/meets.htm

In addition to enjoying the presentations, there will be coffee and muffins provided by ColoRail in the morning. Pizza, salad and cookies will be provided for lunch. The program will end at about 3:30 p.m.

The Arapahoe fairgrounds are located at 25690 E. Quincy Avenue in Aurora (near E-470 & Quincy, next to the Horse Racing track).

Notable Quotes:

New administration needs to link state issues with transportation

“There is little link between the Ritter Administration’s clean energy agenda and transportation and land use. C-DOT still focuses overwhelmingly on highways, not transportation.” Will Toor, Boulder County Commissioner, Transit and Trains for Colorado’s New Energy Economy (a Sierra Club sponsored event in Golden) January 27, 2007.

“Vestas (the Denmark wind turbine company) cited the town’s access to rail services and a skilled workforce as reasons for choosing Windsor.” [Windsor is not on a main line, but is fortunate to be on branch line service that has retained other freight traffic. Just think of how many towns were automatically out of the running for this sort of development, because all that is left of their railway is a bike path or an overgrown roadbed. - editor]

Jonathan Hutchison, Director of Government Affairs, Oakland office, provided ColoRail members with a comprehensive look at Amtrak current and future activities at the group's winter meeting at the Englewood City Center on January 27. Attendees were treated to an extensive review of Amtrak’s problems but also its realistic hopes and prospects for the future.

Mr. Hutchison’s very comprehensive analysis captivated an appreciative audience who continued to ask him questions well after the concluding time of the meeting.

Mr. Hutchison then joined about 15 members for an extensive conversation during lunch at a nearby restaurant.

Although Amtrak’s overall ridership dipped by 1% in Fiscal Year 2006, revenue was up 6% due to new aggressive revenue management strategies employed by the company. Over 24 million people rode Amtrak trains last year. Mr. Hutchison pointed out that if Amtrak was an airline, it would be the nation’s eighth busiest. Amtrak has a cost recovery ratio of 79% from ticket sales which compares very favorably with other public transportation agencies across the country. (RTD, for example, derives about 20% of its income from fares.)

New business has developed primarily on state corridors with California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Washington State adding new services to their existing rail corridors in 2006. Maine’s Downeaster service will be converting a new bus frequency initiated in 2006 to a fifth train for the Boston—Portland route in 2007 once the railroad owner, Guilford Transportation, completes work on a new passing track.

On the negative side, Amtrak has continued to be faced with massive delays on its long distance trains. While the Sunset and Coast Starlight have made modest improvements in their time keeping, the California Zephyr has gotten worse. Amtrak estimates it loses $12 per minute of delay for a long distance train. The railroad lost a total of $40 million in 2006 due to late arriving trains.

Mr. Hutchison mentioned one significant cause of delay to the California Zephyr is a section of mostly straight track west of Salt Lake City which requires 4 hours of operation at 20 mph. Once UP completes its tie replacement efforts in the area, speeds may return to 79 mph.

He pointed out that UP freights must also adhere to the 20 mph limit which has caused many of their own crews to reach the end of their designated hours of service (“go dead”) before

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the future of Amtrak

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arriving at the next crew change point. Though this is costly for the UP, the company has higher priorities for capital expenditures. As time goes on, track repair will continue and speeds should get better however, delays like this add to the Zephyr’s capital costs because Amtrak has to add another train set to the five that are already reserved for the train because of the increasingly slow transit time. Delays also cause labor costs to rise as well as demoralize the crew and irritate passengers.

On the other hand, Mr. Hutchison called the Southwest Chief which serves Southeastern Colorado and the Raton, NM gateway “a solid performer” and a train which has the “respect” of the host railroad, the BNSF Railway. He pointed out that the Chief runs over a double track line in New Mexico and Arizona that hosts 90 freights a day yet the railroad and its dispatchers find a way to keep it on time. He said the route could use some rehabilitated Superliner equipment which he felt would improve its relatively low level of ridership.

At the moment, the US House has approved a continuing resolution for the federal budget which holds Amtrak at $1.2 billion for the current fiscal year. The Senate version is $1.4 billion. These amounts are adequate to maintain present service but do not allow for purchase of badly needed new equipment and new corridor development.

Mr. Hutchison reported that the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (S-294) which was introduced in the Senate earlier in January was probably Amtrak’s best hope for funding to come along in many years. The multi-year funding bill would about $19 billion over the course of six years. Much of this money would be used to improve the Northeast Corridor, pay for new cars and locomotives, and provide money to states for passenger rail corridor development on an 80% federal/20% local matching basis.

There is an expectation that train operating costs must go down 40% over the life of the bill. Some of the money will be set aside to pay Amtrak’s outstanding debt. Contained in the bill are funds to support a state-based rail planning process and for a study to examine the restoration of the Pioneer which ran between Denver, Boise, and Seattle/Portland.

Mr. Hutchison said he had spent the previous afternoon meeting with representatives from RTD and Continuum East-West Partners, the developers of Denver Union Station, to discuss Amtrak’s utilization of the redesigned facility. Topics included having adequate facilities to service the train (e.g. fuel, water, etc), platform and track length, and ventilation.

Mr. Hutchison viewed the relatively limited track space as an operational challenge for Amtrak. He predicted that in all likelihood, Amtrak will expand its services to Denver even though that does not seem possible today.

“Who knew 15 years ago that light rail and commuter rail would once again become so popular in today,” he asked. “Denver was once served by six daily Amtrak trains and it could well happen again.”

He sympathized with the dilemma faced by those having to make the difficult business decisions about redesign of the station yet wanted to make sure that there would be sufficient capacity for intercity rail service that is sure to come. He plans to continue reviewing developments with Union Station planners on behalf of Amtrak on a monthly basis.

Coast Starlight - arrives hours late in Eugene after struggling over congested rails.
Flying with other people’s money

You hear it all the time - Amtrak is "money-losing socialism," since the government subsidizes the national passenger railroad. However, the airline industry is often viewed as group of noble capitalists. In fact, some Amtrak opponents have suggested it would be cheaper to buy Amtrak passengers an airline ticket than to keep passenger trains running.

However, a recent article in the <i>Washington Post</i> provides food for thought. According to the article, the Air Transport Association reports that since 1947, the first year for which the ATA has profit-and-loss figures, the U.S. airline industry has lost a cumulative $14 billion. That's including up to $3 billion the ATA estimates that airlines lost last year. It turns out that airlines are an unforgiving business that has been a net money loser for 60 years.

"Grocery stores give you better returns," Michael Boyd, an Evergreen-based airline consultant told the <i>Denver Post</i>. "Airlines are a crummy business, and will always be a crummy business. When people ask about starting an airline," Boyd said, "first, we say no. Then, if they still want to do it, we say, 'Only if you're using your ex-wife's money.'"<i> Trains Magazine</i> Hot Line, February 27, 2007

Constricted track area limits future for passenger service

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potential operating problems, and safety issues which would be raised by putting the commuter rail tracks underground are simply not worth the advantage to motorists who may wish to drive on an extended 18th Street.

Besides this, the developers want to limit the number of tracks to six which potentially constricts the operation of four commuter rail corridors, Amtrak, and the Ski Train into the station. Additional Amtrak and Front Range passenger trains as well as more commuter trains made necessary by the continuing growth of Denver and Colorado over the next several decades would make the underground station obsolete since it cannot be expanded.

ColoRail proposes a much simpler and less costly design that includes maintaining light rail at grade on its current alignment into the station area, retaining the existing tracks and platforms for commuter rail, Ski Train, and Amtrak at grade with the addition of four more tracks for a total of nine, and adding an RTD regional bus station and an intercity bus station (Greyhound, TMN&O, etc.) above the commuter rail tracks between 18th and 20th Streets just short of the ramp to the HOV lane to I-25. The proposal is similar to Alternative A-2 of the original DUS Master Plan.

This proposal would retain the existing tail tracks which extend to Cherry Creek as well as the "subway" which now serves as a walkway between the light rail station and the historic station.

In the event more money is available, ColoRail recommends light rail be brought into the station from the CML below grade on 17th Street to stub end at the basement wall of the historic station. Light rail passengers could then access commuter trains directly above the light rail underground platform. This proposal is identical to Alternative C-5 of the original DUS Master Plan.

ColoRail has made its concerns known to members of the four agencies who are charged with the supervision of the redevelopment of the station: RTD, C-DOT, City & County of Denver, and the Denver Regional Council of Governments.

Unfortunately, no detectable change has been made in the direction of the current planning.

Negotiations are underway by the developers with each of the transportation providers now using the station: Amtrak, the Ski Train, RTD, and intercity bus lines. With the exception of RTD Express and Regional bus services, each of these modes is being asked to cut back the scale of future service.
Recognizing station volunteers

They haven't yet been called on to offer someone the shirt off their back, and that's a good thing. These experienced ColoRail volunteers at Denver Union Station have a reason to want to hang onto their shirts.

After serving five times -- helping answer questions about the trains, orienting visitors to Denver attractions, encouraging safety, explaining about Amtrak's status, and making themselves generally useful -- volunteer Denver Union Station hosts receive a free shirt with Amtrak and ColoRail logos. This is both a form of recognition for their role, and also helps passengers and staff at the station to recognize them.

ColoRail records show that the following participants have received the recognition shirts:

Mike Cronin
Keith Dameron
Jay Jones
Sara McDowell
Eric Miller
Tom Peyton
Robert Rynerson
Ira Schreiber
Bob Shedd
David Terada
Ron Vander Kooi
Don Zielesch

It should be noted that several of those listed above, as well as others, have participated in previous volunteer activities at the station. However, no records were kept of those informal activities.

Members may also buy one of these shirts for approximately $21 (including tax). It also has the Amtrak and ColoRail logos, but not the "Volunteer Host" inscription.

Thanks for former Board members:

With the results of the January General Meeting, new Board members and members whose terms continue are listed on Page 3.

Those whose terms have been completed are:

Keith Dameron, who worked on whatever needed to be done, including Amtrak schedule adherence. Ron Vander Kooi, who served as Vice-President and worked particularly on Amtrak issues. Don Zielesch, who served as the most organized Secretary that ColoRail has had to date.
Neither lateness nor subzero temperatures failed to dampen the spirits of the thousand strong crowd who met Governor Bill Ritter's Inaugural Train at Pueblo Union Depot. A brass band welcomed Colorado's new first family and a sumptuous feast of fried chicken, spaghetti, sausage, and meatballs was served as numerous politicians headed by Governor Ritter spoke to the enthusiastic crowd. The event was hosted by US Representative John Salazar.

The flag draped main hall of the beautifully restored station was packed with well-wishers who warmed up the place with numerous cheers and standing ovations for members of Colorado's new first family, the Lieutenant Governor, the State Treasurer and a host of other elected officials. The celebration was a fitting end to a day which began in Greeley, with stops for speeches and celebrations along the way in Brighton, Denver, and Colorado Springs.

Though the 10 car train of gleaming Union Pacific Armour Yellow coaches, lounges, and dome cars left Greeley precisely on time, the train progressively lost time as it proceeded south, winding up about two hours late by the time it reached Pueblo.

The train made a painfully slow trip through UP yards into Denver Union Station then an even slower reverse move back on to the Consolidated Mainline to continue its trip-- amply demonstrating the need for a through station when Front Range passenger rail becomes a reality. The train proceeded to run south on UP's northbound joint track it shares with the BNSF Railway to Colorado Springs. It was just south of Colorado Springs that the dispatcher halted the train's passage in favor of a number of northbound coal trains. No one on board seemed to mind but passengers kept getting reports the crowd in Pueblo was getting impatient... and hungry. This impatience melted immediately as the special train rolled into Pueblo.

Photo: Governor and Mrs. Ritter at Denver Union Station stop.