New Commission

by James Souby

The Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission is underway. The thirteen member Commission, created by the 2017 General Assembly, has a twofold mission: sustain and expand Amtrak SW Chief service in southeastern Colorado, and, facilitate the development of front range passenger rail. At its first meeting, the Commission created two committees to advance the mission. A third committee will create a charter for the Commission which will set out the known requirements that must be met to achieve the legislature’s directives. The legislation requires the Commission to draft and submit proposed legislation to advance front range rail to the General Assembly by December 1st. Pueblo County Commissioner Sal Pace was elected Chair, and Denver Regional Council of Governments Long Range Transportation Planning Chief Jacob Riger was elected Vice Chair. ColoRail helped the Legislative sponsors, Senators Larry Crowder (R - Alamosa) and Leroy Garcia (D - Pueblo) and Representative Daneya Esgar (D - Pueblo) in drafting and supporting the legislation.

The Commission met for the second time Friday, September 8th. Both Committees reported. The Southwest effort is currently focused on obtaining a TIGER grant from the

Hybrid Rail & Bus System For Northwest Corridor?

by Robert Brewster

So, no passenger trains, as promised, connecting Longmont, Boulder and Denver in our lifetimes? How did we get to this seeming dead end?

A few decades back, ColoRail’s friend and board member, the late Mike Rowe, wrote a number of guest opinions, primarily for the Boulder Daily Camera, extolling the virtues of commuter rail on the existing tracks between Boulder and Denver (now the BNSF Railway). And a frustrated RTD bus driver, often stuck in traffic on a US 36 bridge over the rail line, wondered why there were no passenger trains on those usually empty tracks.

Nothing much came of those musings, although a group called “Citizens for Commuter Rail” emerged which brought attention to the commuter rail concept. Early numbers bandied about suggested that about $60M could produce a handful of peak hour trains to Denver in the morning and back in the evening. As timed dragged on,

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President's CAB RIDE

Boulder Meeting
ColoRail will meet in Boulder Saturday morning, September 23rd. The meeting is being held at the Hyatt Place Hotel, 2280 Junction Place (about where rail service for Boulder would stop). Doors open at 8:45 am and the meeting will commence at 9:00 am and end at noon.

North by Northwest – Rail and Transit general meeting will take up the prospects for passenger rail service and connecting transit up and down the north Front Range, from Fort Collins into Denver. With the General Assembly’s creation of the Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission, these future projects have new legs, particularly as part of a system connecting people, communities, work places and recreation/tourism opportunities up and down the I-25 corridor. This rail system would be the next transportation breakthrough for Colorado since the construction of Denver International Airport and RTD’s FastTracks. Passenger rail systems have never failed to deliver huge economic benefits to the regions they serve.

Three members of the new Commission, Becky Karasko, Pete Rickershauser and Jim Souby will participate as well as RTD Board Member Judy Lubow, Longmont Councilwoman Joan Peck, State Transportation Commissioner Karen Stuart from SmartCommute is also expected to attend. Boulder Transportation Planners Michael Sweeney, Kathleen Bracke, will discuss the City’s Master Transportation Plan. As part of ColoRail’s continuing effort to look at model rail systems, CU student Alex Funderburg will brief us on the North Carolina passenger rail service where he interned last year. Rich Luckin will present outtakes from his new program, Selling Sunshine focused on the new Brightline system in Florida.

Federal Budget
After a flurry of bi-partisan support for Amtrak funding, House Republican members of the Freedom Caucus attempted to eliminate funding for long-distance trains. Providentially, they were defeated handily on the House floor.

Rally for Trains
ColoRail supported the National Association Railroad Passengers’ (NARP) successful Rally for Trains campaign June 23rd. Volunteers Bob Brewster, Jack Wheeler, Rob Ryerson and Jim Souby assisted passengers on the California Zephyr and provided flyers detailing the Trump Administration budget proposal that would eliminated funding for Amtrak long distance trains. ColoRail founding President Peter Barkmann dropped by the Depot to show his support. Most of the passengers were unaware of the threat to service and many pledged to contact their Congressional Reps and express opposition. Fox TV News carried a detailed report on the effort. A post of the report on ColoRail’s Facebook page garnered thousands of hits as well.

ColoRail Board Meetings
ColoRail’s Board of Directors routinely meet the second Thursday of each month. The meetings, which run from 6 until 8 pm, are open to ColoRail members. We often have guests who participate fully in our deliberations. Contact Jim Souby if you are interested in attending the meetings.
B-Line is attracting riders

by Bob Brewster

RTD’s B-Line commuter rail one-stop service to Westminster from Denver Union Station is reportedly counting between 1500 and 2000 boardings per day. Weekends, especially during special events and ballgames, are scoring especially well.

Even better news is that these riders are apparently not being pilfered from the Flatiron Flyer Westminster station some distance away. Can we assume these passengers are new to transit? Wasn’t that the professed allure of rail when voters approved FasTracks 13 years ago? ColoRail wonders how many riders will be attracted to the B-Line when it reaches Boulder and Longmont. Stay tuned and attend the ColoRail meeting in Boulder on September 23.

ColoRail would like to see all-day half hour service rather than the current mid-day and evening hourly headways. How many more passengers might that attract?
The One That Got Away...... 39971

by Bob Brewster

Sleeping car passengers on Amtrak’s Coast Starlight are familiar with the Pacific Parlour Car, a first class lounge car originally built for the famed Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in 1956. Of the six lounge cars built, Amtrak still rosters 5 for the Starlight, which is an added attraction for that 36-hour Los Angeles - Seattle coastal route. The car remains a popular enticement to ride the train and special activities further enhance the experience. Swivel parlor chairs complement the lounge-style and table seating offerings. The car is a respite from the confines of tiny roomettes and bedrooms and the overhead dome glass brings the outdoors inside.

However, one of those original lounge cars (39971) was sold many years ago, and it now sits forlorn in a used rail car mecca in Madison, Illinois, awaiting an uncertain future, along with its companion coaches and diners. Originally tagged the Santa Fe Hi-Levels, the bi-level concept led to today’s Amtrak Superliner fleet, the more efficient mainstay of most long distance trains, particularly in the west.

Though 60+ years old, the Budd Company’s stainless steel construction techniques make them a timeless rail vehicle. The Hi-Level coaches even have the potential to be starter vehicles for other rail services in Colorado - at a far more affordable price than brand new equipment, despite extensive rehab costs. Front Range Rail? NW Rail?

Now, the audacious proposal: Might the 39971 become a first class parlour car for the newly minted Winter Park Express? This would most certainly require private sector participation, likely in exchange for naming rights and other promotional benefits. Perhaps “Google Parlour Car,” “Silver Bullet Parlour Car,” “Winter Park Parlour Car,” “Mary Jane Parlour Car”…….

The car would require extensive mechanical upgrades and inte-

Colorado’s World-Class Tourist Railroads

by Bob Brewster

ColoRail is most noted for advancing progress toward more rail and transit choices throughout Colorado. Yet, we celebrate, honor, and support the state’s wide array of tourist railroads that attract visitors from around the world. Remnants of the once vast narrow gauge network are particular favorites. And the awesome scenery doesn’t hurt, either!

ColoRail sees parallels between what the early railroaders

Klondike Kate #4 rests on the “new’ turntable at the Como roundhouse on August 19. Hundreds witnessed the birth of Colorado’s newest narrow gauge rail attraction. Photo by Bob Brewster

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Tourist Railroads  
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accomplished, and why, with our organization’s quest for a better mobility matrix of local, regional, and statewide transportation services that offer alternatives to driving on our crowded, often inadequate, and even dangerous roads and highways. Close consideration must also be paid to those who can’t, don’t, or won’t drive. What’s the economic impact of a lack of mobility choices?

Which is precisely how our railroads evolved from around 1870 through today. It was the economic reality that trains were far more efficient in transporting freight tonnage and large numbers of people. That remains true today. Trains are an economic necessity as well as a fully functional modal alternative to compromised highways and uncomfortable airways.

So let’s all celebrate, honor, and support our tourist railroads by stepping back in time with these living, breathing remnants of Colorado history, reminding us of the incredible accomplishments of our forefathers, who conquered the physical and seasonal challenges of this state’s natural but spectacular barriers. They are the story of Colorado in so many ways.

Let’s build upon that legacy as we advance the cause for more transportation choices for our citizens and visitors!

And there is no time like the present to enjoy a potentially early fall color season by visiting our tourist railroads both near and far: Georgetown Loop, Leadville Train, Pikes Peak Cog Railway, Royal Gorge Scenic, Rio Grande Scenic, Durango/Silverton, and most especially, the Cumbres & Toltec, once again cited as America’s #1 train ride! And don’t forget the Ft. Collins Trolley, Colorado Railroad Museum, and the trolley museum in Colorado Springs. Avoid the crowds and traffic jams by visiting on weekdays.

A special tip of the hat to the Brantigans and all the volunteers who introduced another piece of narrow gauge history on August 19 in “downtown” Como, CO. A narrow gauge steam locomotive, tagged “Klondike Kate #4,” operated on a short section of track from the famed Como Roundhouse, of Denver, South Park and Pacific fame, to the restored Como Depot. First rail action since the railroad’s 1937 demise! Hundreds witnessed the special occasion, so watch for more events there next summer. What an accomplishment!

Retirement  
The ColoRail Passenger has a new editor, Chris Spitzer. He takes over from Robert Rynerson, who served as ColoRail’s editor since Issue #1 in August 1988 when what was labeled “an ad hoc group” was formed to fight City/developer plans to evict rail service from Denver Union Station. Originally, the newsletter -- typewritten on an electric typewriter -- had no name. The eventual name was suggested by member Ron Vander Kooi.

Rynerson previously edited the Alberta, Canada rail advocates’ newsletter. His articles and photographs have been published in six countries and in a variety of media formats. He plans to continue writing and editing his history website: www.berlin1969.com.

Christopher A. Spitzer

Robert Rynerson

Enjoy Colorado’s Gold fall colors on the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. Colorado tourist railroads deliver major economic benefits to their surrounding communities, not unlike modern passenger trains. Please support them by visiting!  

Photo by Bob Brewster
Hybrid Rail & Bus System for Boulder?

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the number became $100M, then $200M, and so on. But commuter rail eventually earned a spot on the FasTracks map and the ballot proposal was approved by the voters 13 years ago, especially so in Boulder.

Commuter rail, as the name indicates, is largely a peak hour rail service operating when the efficiencies of rail are most pronounced - large numbers of commuters heading to a central core in the same general time frame. Trains are very good at moving large numbers of people when they all want to go to a common destination at the same time. When the highway mode is the most "challenged." So far, so good.

Passenger trains sharing existing freight rail tracks occurs all the time. It can be economical, efficient, and mutually beneficial. Typically such an arrangement can be accomplished for a fraction of the cost of building all new right of way and infrastructure. A perfect solution, right? What could possibly go wrong?

Well, the proposed rail service along the US 36 & SH 119 corridors morphed into an all day/night “transit” service of about 55 trains per day, basically taking over the capacity of the operating host freight railroad, BNSF. Sticker shock soared to $1.7B before settling back a few hundred million. But with a somewhat parallel and good bus service, are 55 trains a day necessary? At least in the shorter term?

Is it time to revisit Mike Rowe’s decades old vision of peak hour rail, when it is most efficient, and leaving the far lighter demand periods to the evolving bus system, when the highways are more fluid and the passenger loads are a fraction of peak hour demands? A hybrid system.

This is precisely how many other commuter rail systems operate. The Minneapolis Northstar: 5 trains in, 5 trains back & special event trains. Altamont Corridor Express (ACE): 4 trains to San Jose, 4 trains back. West Coast Express: 5 trains.

Front Range Passenger Rail Commission

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U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). USDOT announced the $500 million competitive grant program earlier in the week. Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico are each expected to pledge $1 million in matching funds while Amtrak has pledged $3 million. BNSF Railway was expected to announce its matching amount on Monday, September 11th. The primary applicant for the funds will likely be Colfax County/Raton New Mexico or Trinidad, Colorado. ColoRail has provided matching funds for the past two grants and the Board will take the matter up at its next meeting.

The Front Range Passenger Rail Commission met by conference call September 5th. The Committee identified key questions that must be resolved in order to define a successful passenger rail system. For example, what kind of governance structure would be most suitable to develop and operate the system, and what potential rights-of-way exist for the future service? The Committee also began the process of defining next steps which may become the basis for the legislative proposal. ColoRail provided notes from our scoping meeting last August to help the Committee get its arms around the complex project.

The thirteen member commission includes:

Sal Pace, Pueblo (D), Pueblo County Commissioner public rail transportation advocate
Sara Rae Thompson Cassidy, Edgewater rep. Class I freight railroad rep: Union Pacific Railroad.
James M Souby, Denver rep. public rail transportation advocate, ColoRail
Peter J Rickershauser, Denver rep. Class I freight railroad rep: BNSF Railway
Richard G Klein, La Junta (D) rep. resident of Huerfano, Las Animas, Otero, Prowers or Pueblo counties, City Manager, La Junta

Jill Gaebler, Colorado Springs, President Pro Tem, rep. Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments
Jacob Riger, Long Range Transportation Planning rep. Denver Regional Council of Governments,
Phil Rico, Mayor, Trinidad rep. South Central Council of Governments
Terry Hart, Pueblo, Chair, County Commission rep. Pueblo Area Council of Governments
Bill Van Meter, Asst. GM for Planning rep. Regional Transportation District
Becky Karasko, Fort Collins, Regional Transportation Planning Director Rep, North Front Range MPO
Mark Imhoff, Denver, Director, Division of Transit and Rail rep. Dept. of Transportation, ex-officio, non voting
Ray Lang, Sr. Dir., Govt. Affairs rep. Amtrak, ex officio, non voting
39971... Ski... Ride & Dine

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Prior restoration, requiring likely at least 1/2 to $1 million. Would it pay for itself over several years? Financially, probably not. But from a marketing standpoint? Maybe. But the car would offer an upscale experience and amenities such as meals, snacks, beverages and a more sociable and scenic atmosphere would make it an attractive option for special celebrations and events. The critical concern is that it contributes to Amtrak’s bottom line in operating the WPE.

For more background, Google Gateway railcar, Santa Fe Hi-Levels, and Hi-Level 39971.

ColoRail is aware that food and beverage offerings were a major request during the WPE’s first year of operation, and it is hoped that such services will be a part of the 2nd season. But what about an enhanced F&B, especially for those who patronize the WPE for its scenic attraction rather than its recreational purpose?

ColoRail is not shy about throwing out wild proposals, such as in ColoRail Passenger Issue #76 (see ColoRail.org) where it was suggested that Amtrak would be a likely operator of a renewed Ski Train. We know how that wild proposal went.

ColoRail is under no illusions that it would be an easy or even practical task to bring 39971 back to life, but could it do for the Winter Park Express what its sister parlour cars are still doing for the Coast Starlight? Would it make the journey to Winter Park just that much more of a special experience?

Bustang

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stops will bolster the demand.

Services to Alamosa, Durango, Trinidad, and Grand Junction are very worthy considerations. Our state and its residents and visitors desperately need alternatives to driving. And the need is now, not later! It is not unreasonable to suggest hourly service all day and evening along the I-25 routes, with peak hour expresses. Attractive fares would no doubt fill those buses, perhaps with some bus-on-shoulder advantages.

Please request greatly expanded funding for Bustang and rail services in Colorado from your local, state, and federal representatives. Colorado needs transportation choices and we have much catching up to do. Our booming economy deserves and demands no less!

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trains to Vancouver, 5 trains back. There are many other examples, with varying operating paradigms depending on population and market demand.

Can a peak hour rail service be accomplished in an affordable manner? Can it be done incrementally, as funding is identified? Maybe a portion at a time, such as Longmont to Boulder, before adding the segment to Denver. Since commuter access to Boulder has become a much more demanding challenge, after commuter rail was first discussed as a Boulder to Denver priority, perhaps reviewing travel demand patterns would be instructive to see how rail can be applied most efficiently. Remember ColoRail’s “Building Block” strategy: Minimal, Affordable, Doable, Expandable. The “MADE” principle.

Further, a review of how costs could be held to a minimum is essential. Taking advantage of what already exists is a good place to start. Repurposing, rehabbing, recycling, and restoring various infrastructural requirements would be a very wise exercise, saving money, time, studies, and resources. For example, might the former Burlington passenger train station, built in the 50’s at the end of Bluff St., once again serve its intended purpose and function? A perfect location amidst brand new development and along a straight section of track. SPARKTRAIN at the SPARK Station? Hint....

Finally, is there a private sector entity that sees value in bringing the Northwest Corridor’s rail component to fruition? Possibly in exchange for naming rights or other business advantages? How does the name GoogleTrain sound? That technological behemoth knows full well the value of facilitating its employees commuting needs. First, by way of dedicated motor coaches in San Francisco, and second, the siting of a new workplace complex adjacent to the large Diridon Station rail and bus transit hub in San Jose. Of course, other entities exist that may also see such value.

ColoRail urges the responsible entities, governmental and private, to engage in practical discussions with BNSF Railway to seek an operating formula, with the necessary investment, that improves the operating performance of the freight carrier while simultaneously enabling the operation of at least some peak hour passenger trains that will best serve the market(s); and establish direction for future corridor enhancements for both passenger and freight operations as resources permit.