Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission Overview for Transportation Legislative Review Committee

November 2, 2017
FIRST WE WERE THE SOUTHWEST CHIEF COMMISSION

COMMISSIONER SAL PACE, CHAIR, SOUTHWEST CHIEF & FRONT RANGE PASSENGER RAIL COMMISSION
In 2011, discontinuing Amtrak’s Southwest Chief across southern Colorado was a likelihood.

- 632 miles of track between Newton, KS, and Lamy, NM needed upgrading to maintain Amtrak’s Southwest Chief operations, particularly in Kansas and Colorado.

- Amtrak’s contract with BNSF Railway expired in 2016.

- BNSF freight traffic over the route had declined since the original contract was executed 25 years ago.

- Track repair and maintenance estimated at over $200 million over 10 years, well beyond Amtrak’s budget.
Accomplishments

• 2014 TIGER 6 Grant
  • BNSF, Kansas DOT and Amtrak pledge $9 million match
  • 14 Colorado and Kansas Counties, Communities and Advocates additionally pledge over $330,000
  • BNSF commits to repair worst track segments to maximize improving the SW Chief’s performance
  • US DOT awards $12.5 million grant!
Accomplishments (cont’d)

• 2015 TIGER 7 Grant
  • Colorado and New Mexico DOT’s join application
  • 22 communities, counties and advocates from 3 states join application
  • US DOT awards $15.2 million grant

• New replacement rail manufactured in Colorado!

• Over $46 million has now been raised and 137 miles of track has been replaced, creating “time table” space for Pueblo stop
Accomplishments (cont’d)

• Success leads BNSF to assume full maintenance costs for restored track, relieving Amtrak of huge burden

• Commission seeking Southwest Chief “through car service” for Pueblo and beyond
  • Chicago to Pueblo through service on dedicated cars cut off at La Junta for traveling to and from Pueblo
  • Beyond Pueblo, Colorado Springs at 40 miles, and Denver at 110 miles create potential realistic Front Range passenger rail scenario serving more Coloradans
  • Pueblo County ballot measure approved in 2016
2017 SW Chief Commission Sunsets; General Assembly Creates New Commission

- SB 17-153 creates the SOUTHWEST CHIEF AND FRONT RANGE PASSENGER RAIL COMMISSION
- Housed under CDOT
- Broad Commission make-up, including:
  - Two freight railroad industry representatives
  - Five representatives from the Councils of Government/Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the Front Range
  - RTD representative
  - Two statewide passenger rail advocates
  - SW Chief representative, and –
  - Non-voting representatives from CDOT and Amtrak
• Continue Amtrak Southwest Chief Line track rehabilitation, expansion to Pueblo, and consider adding service to Walsenburg

• Facilitate the development of Front Range Passenger Rail

• Directed to draft legislation due by December 1, 2017 to facilitate mission; however, Commission continues statutory purpose beyond that date

• Authority to receive & expend funds
What we’ve been working on

- We were appointed in July, 2017

- We have held five very comprehensive Commission meetings

- We established two subcommittees and an ad hoc committee to address our commitments - they have collectively met another dozen times

- We participated in Southwest Chief Tiger 9 application submitted October 16th

- We have two more formal meetings slated in November to formalize our recommendations to the General Assembly
Why is Exploring Front Range Rail Important?

• Colorado and Front Range population growth is coming – traffic congestion will get worse

• Travel options and mobility freedom need to be enhanced

• Critical for economic development & ability to compete for major employers – maintaining highest quality of life

• Passenger rail is popular – growing support and demand

• Passenger rail is a multi-year strategy – won’t delay current projects

• Greater connectivity between rural and metro areas of Colorado
Front Range Passenger Rail Subcommittee

Purpose
• Address December 1, 2017 legislative deadline
• Identify Front Range passenger rail vision, issues, needs, next steps to move toward a proposal for implementation

Commission Members
• Front Range MPOs, governments
• BNSF and UP railroads
• RTD and Colorado Rail Passenger Association (ColoRail)
• CDOT staff support

Schedule
• Met 1-2 times monthly between August-November
Many Issues to Consider…

- Target Markets
- Public Engagement
- Technology
- Alignment
- Service & Operating Characteristics
- Costs
- Potential Funding Options
- Governance Structure & Service Operator
- Regulatory Environment
- SWC&FRPR Commission Considerations
- Potential Legislative Request
- Commission’s Next Steps
Target Markets

- What would make interregional passenger rail a compelling investment for the entire Front Range?
- Who are we trying to serve?
- What future mobility needs must be met?
- What is the best balance of travel times, price points, construction costs, other factors?
Public Engagement

- Increase public awareness of key issues
- Establish a Front Range mobility vision
- **Comprehensive public engagement is critical**
• High performance rail technologies are available – high speed, commuter rail, etc.

• Relationship to potential Hyperloop?
• Directly serve downtown Denver vs. DEN/DIA
• Maximize RTD, other transit rail/bus connections
• Several route options north and south of metro Denver, other communities
• Shared existing rail corridors or greenfield?
Service & Operating Characteristics

- Frequency, span of service, station locations?
- Speed, travel time?
- Fares?
- Connectivity with other modes? (Bustang, local transit, park and rides)
• Determine capital and operating costs
  ○ Pre-Construction
  ○ Construction
  ○ Fleet
  ○ Operations, maintenance, life cycles
Potential Funding Options

- Several mechanisms/options (special districts, RTAs, etc.)
- Ongoing, dedicated funding
- Federal, state, local
- Private/P3
- Passenger fares
Governance Structure & Service Operator

- Governance: Interregional authority, special district, transit agency, etc.
- Operator: public or private
Regulatory Environment

- Federal Railroad Administration
- Federal Transit Administration
- Colorado PUC
- Planning, project development process requirements
SWC&FRPR Commission Considerations

• Draft legislation by December 1, 2017
• Ongoing stakeholder outreach and consensus building
• Staffing need: Commission work, study processes and consultant assistance
Potential Legislative Request – NOT asking for:

- Legislative changes
- Immediate, complete solution
Potential Legislative Request – May ask for:

- Continued support
- Financial assistance for:
  - Public engagement/visioning
  - Federally compliant project development process leading to implementation
  - Staff support & ongoing Commission activities
Commission’s Next Steps

- Engage public, set Front Range mobility vision
- Establish preferred route
- Meet federal requirements
- The Commission intends to position the project for funding and construction
Questions & Discussion
THANK YOU!

Sal Pace
County Commissioner
Pueblo County
pace@pueblocounty.us
(719) 583-6536

Jacob Riger, AICP
Long Range Transportation Planning Manager
Denver Regional Council of Governments
jriger@drcog.org
(303) 480-6751