Strong political support saves Southwest Chief from bus replacement!

By Danny Zimny-Schmitt

Early this summer, Amtrak submitted a proposal to use charter bus service in lieu of rail service on a portion of the Southwest Chief route between Dodge City or La Junta and Albuquerque, citing the high costs of maintenance and implementing positive train control on that portion of the run from Chicago to Los Angeles. This proposal would have thus completely robbed southeastern Colorado of intercity rail service.

The reasoning given by Amtrak for this suspension of rail service over hundreds of miles of track was that federally-mandated positive train control will not be installed by the December 31 deadline. The proposition, which came to be colloquially known as “bustitution,” was actively opposed by ColoRail and the national Rail Passengers Association.

On August 1, the Senate voted to pass a funding bill that includes $2.5 billion for passenger rail service, explicitly mentioning that the Southwest Chief would remain on its current route and ending the bus bridge proposal. This victory was made possible by the dedicated support of rail advocates, and is the culmination of events earlier in the summer by senators expressing their discontent with Amtrak’s proposal.

In a late July appropriations bill to fund the Department of the Interior, Environmental Protection Agency, and related agencies, the U.S. Senate adopted an amendment that supports long distance Amtrak passenger trains. Amendment 3414, proposed by Senator Tom Udall (D-NM), passed 95-4, including support from each senator in the Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico delegations.
Well, as suspected last spring, 2018 has become a rip-roaring passenger rail year. What is strange about it is that the hardest issue, getting funding for the Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission, has been resolved with the approval of the Colorado Joint Budget Committee. On the other hand, the no brainer and hugely successful campaign to stabilize and sustain the Southwest Chief has ground to an unexpected and expensive delay. This was caused by a stunning reversal by, of all the partners, Amtrak, which has a new management team.

Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission

On the positive side, thanks to the leadership of House Speaker Crisanta Duran and House Transportation Committee Chair Faith Winter, assisted by members of the Commission and many other leaders up and down the Front Range, the Legislature approved a bipartisan appropriation of $2.5 million dollars for the Commission. The appropriation was subject to the further approval of the Joint Budget Committee which allocated $938,000 for the current fiscal year. The Commission will request the balance in the upcoming legislative session.

The Commission will begin its comprehensive outreach and service development planning late this fall, after a project director and service planning contract are awarded. Recruitment for the position has begun and a Request for Proposals will be released shortly by the Colorado Department of Transportation once the project management position is filled.

ColoRail is supporting the Commission in our usual manner – outreach to civic organizations and the public. The dramatic difference this time around is we don’t have to end with “wait til next year”. Instead, we can tell everyone how to engage and support the Commission and advance Front Range passenger rail.

Examples of our support include meetings with Front Range Mayors and planning officials. Recently, ColoRail Board member Nancy McCaffrey arranged a visit with the Fort Carson public works management team. The meeting was very productive – we learned how passenger rail might fit in with the Post’s future transportation needs and they learned of the new Front Range planning effort. Board members Jack Wheeler and Phyllis Kane joined Jim Souby in briefing Fort Carson Mayor Wade Troxell and Colorado State University transportation and planning leaders Aaron Fodge and Fred Haberecht in August. In October, Souby met with Senate Appropriations Staff Member Jacob Press to discuss rail funding the FAST Act reauthorization at the request of Kelsey Keegan and Cathy Garcia of Senator Cory Gardner’s staff. ColoRail will continue its outreach so if you know of an organization or leader that would benefit from a discussion of the project and Commission, please let me know.

Threatened Southwest Chief Service Saved by U.S. Senate Intervention

Much to the consternation of the Southwest Chief coalition partners, Amtrak withheld its three million dollar match to the TIGER 9 grant awarded to Colfax County, New Mexico. Amtrak raised both safety and funding concerns about the train. The safety concerns apparently arose from Amtrak’s Board of Directors mandate that it only run trains on routes equipped with Positive Train Control (PTC). Citing the safety matter, Amtrak announced that it planned to substitute a bus bridge for the SW Chief between Dodge City and Albuquerque.

PTC is a signaling system that tracks trains, detects safety hazards and warns the crew or stops the train if no action is taken. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) regulates PTC implementation and requires its installation if certain risk factors exist on a route such as significant freight and/or passenger traffic, and the transportation of certain hazardous materials.

On the SW Chief route in the three states, only a small portion of the route near Albuquerque requires PTC under the FRA rules. This segment is part of the Rio Metro Rail Runner route. Rio Metro and the New Mexico Department of Transportation have applied for an extension of the requirement, obtained a $29 million federal grant to install PTC, and agreed to mitigate risk on the route until the new system is installed. It is anticipated this plan will be accepted by FRA, eliminating the safety issues for the SW Chief. This should be a satisfactory resolution to Amtrak’s safety concerns but the railroad refused to accept the FRA’s assessment of the safety of the route. In fact it is likely a bus bridge would be much less safe than the train.

Cab Ride- Page 6
Exciting developments abound regarding transportation in rural Colorado. CDOT has rolled out its new Bustang Outrider service, a division of its popular Bustang lines. Bustang is the first state owned and operated interregional bus service providing commuters, visitors, and explorers bus transit up and down the I-70 and I-25 corridors. A part of the vision and purpose of the Bustang system is to have a strong presence in rural communities throughout the state in addition to serving the front range and mountain urban corridors. The mission to serve rural Colorado is being realized by the introduction of Bustang Outrider. The new service utilizes smaller, brand new, 35 foot over the road coaches that are painted in black with aqua blue decals and lettering. The introductory routes are as follows:

Pueblo - Lamar (with extension to Colorado Springs late 2018)
Pueblo - Alamosa
Denver - Gunnison
Grand Junction - Durango

The only new route is the Pueblo to Lamar round trip. The other routes were being operated by different private contractors who were receiving subsidies to operate their respective services. CDOT now has taken over these lines with regards to equipment, marketing, and operating subsidies, and they have contracted local transit agencies to operate and maintain the dispersed fleet of Outrider buses. This dispersed operations and maintenance model allows CDOT to expand beyond its Denver based Bustang operations. Because CDOT has now taken over these rural services, customer comfort and service are now up to 21st century standards (wifi, bathrooms, tray tables, power outlets). With a unified brand and new equipment, Bustang Outrider is set to be an enormously beneficial addition to Colorado’s transportation ecosystem. But CDOT is not stopping their expansion efforts with these new additions. They are in continuous planning and outreach efforts with cities and transit agencies that are candidates for future Bustang Outrider expansion (view figure 1 for corridors being considered).

Additional expansions to the Bustang system are also planned. These include:

Denver to Grand Junction Bustang roundtrip (CDOT took over Greyhound trip on 06/29/18)
Denver to Raton Bustang roundtrip serving Pueblo and Trinidad (late 2018)
New service to and from Castle Rock
New service to and from Longmont
Additional winter seasonal service on the I-70 corridor (winter 2018-19)
Winter Park Express Excited for Season!

By Harry Safstrom

Ski Season is off to a great start and The Winter Park Express (WPE) train to Winter Park is back for its third season, utilizing Amtrak Superliner Coaches. The collaborative effort between Amtrak and Winter Park Resort will again be supported by about 50 Colorail volunteer train hosts. Our hosts provide directions and information about the route, train and destination and collaborate the Amtrak crew to handle skis at train side.

The WPE "ski train" is without question the easiest, most enjoyable and relaxing way to and from the slopes. No I-70 traffic jams, driving stress and weather issues. The WPE is the only train in North America to directly serve a ski area. It stops at a dedicated heated platform, literally feet from chair lifts and the Winter Park Resort base area shops and restaurants and free bus connections to downtown Winter Park for non-skiiers.

Operational dates have been expanded this year to include all Saturdays and Sundays January through March 2019 plus the first two Fridays of each month (and even a Thursday group charter run).

The WPE will leave Denver Union Station promptly at 7AM and depart Winter Park Resort at 4:30PM with average time travel time of less than 2 hours each way. Boarding begins as early as 6 AM and is seating is open. You may leave unneeded possessions on board at Winter Park, although the train will not be accessible during the day.

Fares start at $29 each way so be sure to buy your tickets early as prices go up as load factors increase.

Winter Park has invested considerable capital in its facilities this summer including a new enclosed 10-person Gondola from WP base (replacing the Zephyr chair lift), a new snowmaking system and improvements in the base village area.

Although the WPE is a "ski train", we find about 35% of passengers come for the ride and non-skiing activities. It is a great family activity, company event experience and just plain fun for passengers of all ages. Its continuation depends on ridership support, so bring your friends and family!!!

We look forward to seeing you on the WPE. ALL ABOARD! - -
By Dan Bilka

Pueblo, Colorado! Steel City and the southern anchor of the Front Range Metropolitan area. This storied city is much more than meets the eye, a true gem of the Front Range.

Historically, the Steel City was an important railroad and shipping city as well as home to the steel industry. It was Colorado’s Gateway to the west for the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad with numerous other railroad serving the city via the magnificent Pueblo Union Station. Known as “The Hometown of Heros”, four native-sons were awarded the Purple Heart from their service in WWII.

Historical accolades aside, Pueblo is a world-class city with world class industries and attractions. Retooling after the decline of the US Steel Industry in the 1970s, Pueblo is finding new ways of mixing old and new to inform the future. The railroad legacy lives in on with the Transportation Technology Center Inc., operating a research test track and training facility northeast of the city to evaluate new and existing railroad technologies.

Re-routing of the Southwest Chief will reinvigorate the train itself and the city (if speed performance can be improved to compensate the increased length) for the benefit of all across this nation. Studies have indicated a sizable growth in potential ridership and benefits to the local economy by a proposed rerouting.

Visitors to the city can enjoy the beautiful river walk (original path of the Arkansas River through downtown before the devastating 1921 flood) and marvel at the architecture and history of this western metro area.

Pueblo’s best days are not locked in the past however; the region is quickly becoming a center of renewable energy development with large-scale solar and wind projects happening throughout the area. For you rodeo fans, Pueblo is home to the Colorado State Fair since 1872 (yes before statehood), And now the home of the PBR (Professional Bull Riders Association) since 2008. Just as Pueblo was an important point of shipment and innovation in the past, it will continue to be in the future.

While you’re in town, you should try the Slopper, a local specialty so prized even chains like the Country Kitchen advertise their own version.

Pueblo: A Lady in Waiting

Trackside At Pueblo Union Station
Photo: Dan Bilka
**Cab Ride:**

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With respect to costs, Amtrak's new management announced it would require an immediate plan to fund $50 million to fund capital improvements for the track the SW Chief runs on in New Mexico. The railroad is witheld its $3 million match to the TIGER 9 Grant which was awarded to Colfax County, NM, last Spring. Amtrak put its draconian conditions on the grant awarded by the US Dept. of Transportation in spite of the fact it was a partner in the application and the two previous grants it matched. Amtrak also labeled the efforts of the partners, who had raised $71 million for the route improvements, "piece meal."

Of course, none of the public partners can commit future legislative bodies to fund projects like this, so the demand seemed to be an obvious effort to derail the campaign to sustain the train. In derailing the TIGER 9 grant, Amtrak also foiled plans by the partners to apply for a Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Discretionary Grant in 2018. The BUILD program was triple the size of the 2017 TIGER 9 program, setting aside $1.5 billion, including funds for rural projects.

All the partners are aware of the need for improvements to the New Mexico route. Upon award of the TIGER 7 grant, Amtrak committed to run the train for 20 years which provided the partners ample time to deal with those needs. In fact, the TIGER 9 grant allocates at least $5.2 million to the New Mexico track segment in question. Amtrak's decision not only damaged it credibility, prevented the improvements funded in TIGER 9, precluded the partnership's next step, but also raised the ire of its bi-partisan Congressional supporters who had just given the railroad its largest appropriation ever.

Further analysis of the PTC mandate revealed that if the railroad actually carried out their safety mandate, it would affect ten trains in addition to the Chief. For example, the California Zephyr would also be subject to cancellation, rerouting or a bus bridge. To further complicate the matter, Amtrak announced that it will require over $53 million to install PTC on the SW Chief route, in spite of the fact it is not required by the FRA. This was in addition to the $50 million for track improvements in New Mexico. Talk about throwing the gauntlet down! All six U.S. Senators from Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico rose up to reverse Amtrak's new position.

Following angry meetings, the SW Chief Congressional Coalition Senators passed an Amendment to the House Minibus Spending Bill, HR6147. The Senate amendment directed that Amtrak use its own resources for the New Mexico improvements and provided legal protection for the train and the Amtrak national interstate network over Fiscal Year 2019. The measure was temporarily set aside due to the election recess, but the overwhelming Senate vote in favor convinced Amtrak to withdraw the bus substitution plan. They cited safety reasons for the decision and one wonders what kind of decision process led to the substitution plan in the first place. Now all eyes, including ColoRail’s are focused on the Congressional reauthorization of passenger rail in surface transportation legislation coming up this next session of Congress. That legislation should include the HR6147 language for the national interstate passenger sail system and the Southwest Chief.

**Regional SW Chief and National Interstate Network Campaigns are Still Underway**

ColoRail is partnering with the Rail Passengers Association (RPA) to continue and expand a nationwide campaign to save the SW Chief and the rest of the Amtrak Interstate Network. The campaign has already generated support from 100 Mayors, County Commissioners and other local leaders along the routes served by Amtrak. Of course, the three state SW Chief Congressional Caucus of Senators and Representatives from Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico already has a head start. The Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission and ColoRail have been supporting this powerful coalition from the beginning. The campaign will now focus on reauthorization.

**The Next Big Step for Amtrak**

The SW Chief campaign is more than saving a train. The Amtrak Interstate Network is the basis for future growth and expansion of passenger rail across the nation. Starting in 2011, the coalition of community leaders and advocates recognized that the future value of the train is more than its important contributions to community economies and citizen mobility on the current route. The train provides a spine for future service and connections. For example, the train is a natural anchor for Front Range passenger service in Colorado and its route would link that service with Albuquerque and Cheyenne eventually. Service to Oklahoma and Texas would also grow the National Network bolstering SW Chief ridership and connecting service to more growing communities.

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Cab Ride:

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This thinking helped cement support for the train and the successful TIGER Grants and legislative victories we have won.

At our Spring meeting, ColoRail members discussed the next big step for Amtrak’s National Interstate Network: re-equipping the trains. The current Genesis engines and Superliner passenger cars are on their last legs, and maintenance costs are rising. Rather than scrapping trains, it is time for Amtrak to grow capacity and begin to expand service with modern, comfortable passenger cars including sleepers and diners and state of the art locomotives.

As a member of the RPA Board and it’s Mountains and Plains Division Director, I am heading up the advocates in the six caucus states. Southern Division Leader Paul Nelson has been heading up the national campaign closely coordinated with ours. Your support and ideas are needed!

State Rail Plan

The Colorado Dept of Transportation (CDOT) has completed the final draft of the State Freight and Passenger Rail Plan. ColoRail received a special grant of $1,000 from the primary contractor, Cambridge Systematic, in appreciation for our contributions to the plan. The Transportation Commission has approved the plan. If the plan receives Federal Railroad Administration approval, the state qualifies for federal assistance over the next five years. The draft plan will be posted by CDOT once approval from the FRA is received.

Join ColoRail!

As always, we urge members and friends to join or renew their memberships. Membership is the strength of our organization. We are totally volunteer and rely on your support to carry us forward. We will start our year end Holiday fund raising campaign soon. By the way, you can always give a ColoRail membership as a holiday gift, too. I’ve done this for my sons for years. If you purchase gifts via Amazon, ColoRail has a charitable set aside there. Every contribution counts in our important campaign!

Southwest Chief:

Cont from Page 1

The amendment states “It is the sense of Congress that 1) long-distance passenger rail routes provide much-needed transportation access for 4,700,000 riders in 325 communities in 40 States and are particularly important in rural areas; and 2) long-distance passenger rail routes and services should be sustained to ensure connectivity throughout the National Network.” This strong language reflects the growing bipartisan political support for all of Amtrak’s national network of trains.

In addition to the amendment, the ten senators from Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Illinois, and California also wrote a letter voicing opposition to this bus substitution plan for this portion of the Southwest Chief route. “The potential suspension of rail service has raised serious concerns among our constituents who depend on the Southwest Chief,” the senators urged. “We strongly disagree with such a decision and urge you to uphold Amtrak’s commitment to intercity rail service across the entire national network, particularly through our rural communities.” Senators emphasized the importance of this transportation choice in providing a vital economic link to rural areas.

Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS), joined by all senators from the Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico delegations, met with Amtrak staff and CEO Richard Anderson in late June to express their opposition to the proposal and to ask Amtrak to honor its commitment to contribute its $3 million toward the TIGER grant awarded for improvements on the Southwest Chief route. They faced push-back from Amtrak on both fronts.

“The end result of the meeting with Mr. Anderson and a bunch of his staff was certainly no suggestion that their mind had been changed,” Moran said. “Then the conversation devolved into a slide presentation and conversation by Mr. Anderson about the financial challenges of the system and systemic issues of the current Southwest Chief route.”

Clearly, the growth in political support for national network trains and the Southwest Chief in particular is a victory for rail advocacy and all passengers served by this mobility option. While the support is encouraging, the fight is far from over. Amtrak continues to drag its feet in contributing its designated portion of TIGER grant funding for maintenance of the Southwest Chief route, and an official positive train control exemption for the route has not officially been granted. It remains important for advocates to remain engaged in the challenges yet to come.

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Denver Union Station: Signage Lacks

By Alex Funderburg and Luke Sponable

Plainview is one of the most scenic locations on the Moffat Tunnel Subdivision. The railroad weaves among the flatirons and gives the passenger the impression of soaring over the Great Plains as the train climbs towards the Moffat Tunnel. While one does get the impression of flying above the plains, no passenger should ever be on the train with the actual intention to fly.

That is exactly what happened this past year. A family on vacation to the US made this realization that their plans to take the University of Colorado A Line to DIA had backfired. Instead of boarding the commuter rail, they had boarded a Amtrak train bound for the Moffat Tunnel and points west. Confusion like this should never happen, especially in a facility like Denver Union Station which was designed to ease the transfer between modes of travel. Alas, a simple element which helps aid passengers make connections is lacking.

Signage.

This should be an elementary design feature but signage at Union Station is lacking at best. The main train hall has minimal signage. The bus terminal should have directional signs at every gate. The A line almost exclusively uses track one and two yet people are still left questioning which train to take to the airport. There is no reason why this shouldn’t be designated by signage. Track four is where the California Zephyr always arrives; why is this not displayed prominently? For greater differentiation tracks four and five could be labeled as “intercity services” because that is more or less all they can be used for as of now. Wayfinding techniques as simple as using clear signage, colors, numbers, maps and simple diagrams are cheap to implement yet they improve the user experience immensely.

This past year as a host for the Winter Park Express, I was asked multiple times if the Ski Train was the A or B commuter rail lines. I was also asked multiple times where the light rail platforms are located. These are questions which should not have to be asked if the signage is abundant and easy to understand properly.

I would challenge the leaders at RTD to remedy this situation. Not everyone using Union Station is a local, and thus the signage at Union Station must accommodate all users. It is, for many, the gateway to Denver. Wayfinding has many simple fixes, but it is critical and cannot be vague. An arrow pointing in a general direction is not good enough. Union Station is a vast complex spread over many blocks and for many, can be a confusing place to understand. Simple yet effective and even some creative solutions are the best ways to solve these wayfinding issues.

There is no excuse for why this issue cannot be fixed promptly. Signs are cheap, especially in contrast to the overall price-tag of Union Station. Let’s make this happen and help our leaders remember that transportation is the most important component of a multi-modal hub like Union Station. Denver Union Station is one of the greatest American multi-modal, mixed-used developments of the 21st century, but something as simple as signage should have been solved a long time ago.
RPA conference highlights success of private intercity rail, plans for Amtrak reauthorization

By Danny Zimny-Schmitt

RPA conference highlights success of private intercity rail, plans for Amtrak reauthorization

In mid-October, the Rail Passenger Association advocacy group held their national conference in Miami, Florida. Four ColoRail members made the trip to learn about ongoing advocacy efforts at the national level and to learn from Brightline, a new privately-funded intercity rail service in South Florida.

Brightline is a sleek, new rail service running from Miami to Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, with future plans to extend service to Orlando and Tampa. Service began in May, and trains are already seeing high patronage as the service plying the dense urban coastal corridor. Modern stations and railcars combined with onboard food and beverage options make the journey comfortable and convenient.

Jose Gonzales from Florida East Coast Industries, the firm behind the project financially, shared some of the background details and insights with conference attendees about why the privately-backed project succeeded where so many other private rail development proposals have failed. It began with careful selection of station locations, selected based upon where redevelopment was already being encouraged by local authorities. These were usually in the form of an economic development zone that allowed for tax breaks to be taken advantage of, and the creation of the rapid transit zone blessed by each county and city that allowed for larger developments on nearby parcels, which Florida East Coast Industries had already acquired.

These zoning changes and the backing of local governments were absolutely necessary to make the financials work, Gonzales made clear, and the success of private rail development in other places across the country would likely also need such backing. From the private development standpoint, most land in the station areas went from being parking lots or other low density occupancy with low tax liability into billion dollar developments that Florida East Coast Industries is able to monetize while simultaneously providing each city with an increased tax base. At the Brightline Miami Central station, parcels next to the station are being developed into retail, office, and residential spaces.

The conference also served as a launching pad for RPA’s advocacy efforts on the FAST Act Reauthorization that will be considered in the next Congress. Reauthorization will provide direction to Amtrak on how to sustain and improve the interstate rail system, including the Southwest Chief and California Zephyr. Priorities will likely include adequate funding authorization for Amtrak and various rail grant programs, better on time performance and related shared use issues, further direction on Positive Train Control compliance, right of way acquisition and protection, and equipment upgrades. All of these issues are important to Colorado. Support from ColoRail members will be critical to secure a favorable reauthorization.

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Brightline now operates private intercity service between Miami and West Palm Beach; soon to Orlando with proposals for eventually extending to Tampa and Jacksonville.

Photo: Dan Bilka
Pueblo:

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Pueblo offers many of the characteristics that set the Front Range aside from other regions, however, without the exorbitant cost of living as seen in Denver, Boulder or Ft. Collins. The legacy of the Steel Industry (diminished yet still vital to the community) shows the hard work ethic of its citizens.

The future of Steel City is already being shaped by the citizens and businesses that call it home. Front Range Passenger Rail is a critical, pressing, need for its people as with Colorado and the Front Range Megaregion as a whole. Better transportation will facilitate easier travel to this gem of the state.

When Front Range Passenger Rail finally comes pulling in the station, perhaps you can take a trip down to the Steel City and see all that this world-class city has to offer! --

Outrider:

Cont. From Page 3

In order to realize these expansions, CDOT has ordered 4 additional, 45 feet long, over the road Bustang coaches. These actions taken by CDOT strongly support the notion that Coloradans wish to drive less while traveling along the transportation corridors of the state. Although these new options are bus transit, successful interregional bus service will be a large indicator for state officials that rail service is justified in respective transportation corridors.

One can now travel from Denver to Durango (with a connection in Grand Junction) in one day on public transit that offers significant improvements in customer comfort and service. Connections are scheduled in Salida to offer more options for those traveling in the Arkansas River and San Luis Valleys. Skiers will have more options in the winter to get to and from the slopes. Commuters along the front range will have more flexibility and more drive-free options. Getting around Colorado without a car has now been made easier thanks to the additions of Bustang Outrider and Bustang. --
About ColoRail

“ColoRail” is the nickname for the Colorado Rail Passenger Association, a non-profit education and advocacy organization that seeks to restore passenger train service within the state. ColoRail focuses on issues such as the RTD FasTracks transit program, proposed rail travel between the cities of the Front Range, maintaining and improving Amtrak’s services, travel from the Front Range to the Western Slope, and rail transportation in general: passenger & freight.

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ColoRail, the Colorado Rail Passenger Association, is in correspondence and coordinates with RPA: The Rail Passenger Association [national]. Membership in both organizations is encouraged.

Join ColoRail!

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Please enclose check or money order or enroll online.

$20 PER YEAR
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Happy Holidays
from ColoRail!!

ColoRail Network and Vision Map