

## **Western Rail Coalition Letter - Eagle River Valley Service**

Dear Governor Polis, Director Lew, and the Colorado Transportation Commission,

Colorado's Western Rail Coalition urges your support to expand CDOT's Mountain Rail concept to study connecting the Eagle and Arkansas River Valleys with frequent, quiet, and low-emission passenger rail service in the near term at a very economical cost.

### **Advocacy Context**

While our coalition is fully supportive of the existing Mountain Rail project between Denver and Craig, we believe that such a limited scope cannot be the extent of our state's short-term ambitions. These ambitions should include far more of the Western Slope and Arkansas River Valley. Our coalition has a grounded vision that can quickly tap into high-potential existing rail assets for the people of Colorado and its visitors.

### **Why prioritize the Eagle River Valley?**

**Today, there is a monumental but time-limited opportunity to work with private rail carriers who are equipped to and interested in supplying new local passenger rail service between Leadville and Glenwood Springs, what we are calling the Eagle River Valley Service.** Union Pacific's out-of-service Tennessee Pass Line (dormant since 1997) is currently leased to a passenger rail operator, the Rio Grande Pacific Corporation (RGPC), which is interested in running a local passenger service on the line with quiet, modern, and low-emission rail vehicles. However, their plan relies on support from CDOT and locals such as area municipalities to bring the line back for the benefit of the public; they may not renew their lease with the Union Pacific Railroad if support for passenger rail is not evident.

### **Where would trains run?:**

**The service will connect Minturn, Dowd/Vail, Avon/Beaver Creek, Edwards, Eagle, Eagle County Regional Airport, and Gypsum with hourly or better service with some trains continuing onto Leadville in the south and Glenwood Springs in the west.**

At the center of this segment, the existing rails in Avon are located directly adjacent to the Riverfront Express Gondola and the ski slopes of Beaver Creek Resort in addition to Avon's main transit center. This transit hub offers CORE Transit bus connections to the town of Vail along with other private and public operators like Vail Ski Resort and the Town of Avon. Extending the service west to Glenwood Springs links the Eagle River Valley/Tennessee Pass Line to the Roaring Fork Transit Authority's connections to Aspen and existing Amtrak services, thus providing a valuable alternative to the traffic-choked stretch of I-70 through Glenwood Canyon. Providing service south to Leadville will create a reliable alternative to a commute pattern that is highly vulnerable to disruptive road closures along Highway 24.

### **What are the benefits?**

**The Eagle River Valley Rail Service project promises visibility toward strong ridership as a rail success story, and will go further for each state investment dollar than nearly any other near-term mobility project.**

This project will be the first step in connecting Colorado's I-70 ski resort mecca with vastly more affordable housing and transit options via rail. This car-competitive rail service will connect the dense ski resort town of Avon / Beaver Creek to the Eagle County Airport on day one, subject to simple facilitation by CORE Transit. Many of these workers and skiers in Eagle County currently commute by car and are plagued with weather uncertainties, higher-than-average traffic incidents, and lofty parking costs. It is our goal that the economic benefits and success of this project will lead to expanded connections in Lake, Chaffee, Fremont, and Garfield counties.

### **Importance to State Interests**

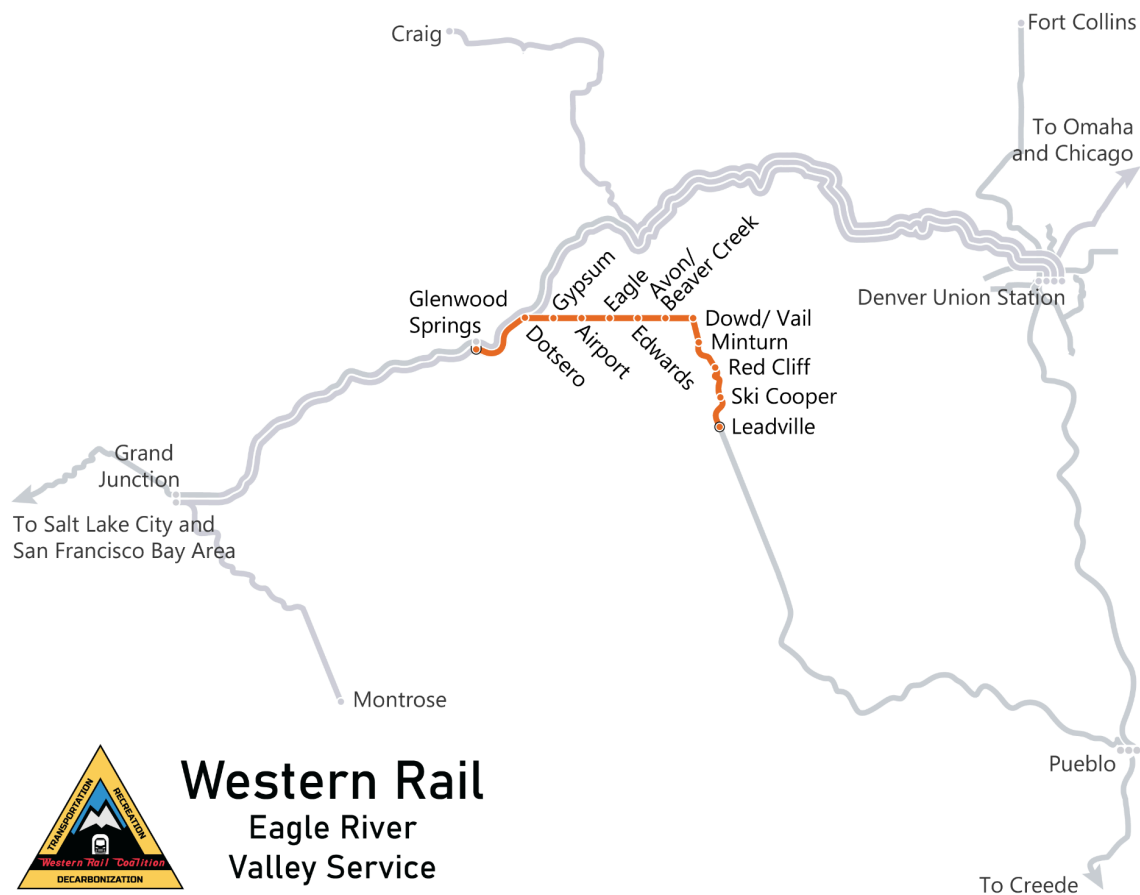
**This will be the most visible and long-lasting rail win that could be attributed to your administration.** Please direct CDOT to open a dialogue with the Rio Grande Pacific and Union Pacific railroads and to commence a study in the form of a service development plan (SDP) that quantifies the actual project costs and benefits. It should be a core goal to secure the necessary funding and preparation to start construction activities within the next two years.

Sincerely,

Colorado's Western Rail Coalition

- Kim Langmaid, Walking Mountains Founder, Fmr. Mayor of Vail
- Amy Phillips, Mayor of Avon
- Kathy Chandler-Henry, Eagle County Commissioner
- Bryan Hannegan, President and CEO of Holy Cross Energy
- Tamra Nottingham Underwood, Avon Resident and Public Official
- Connor Roth, The Offgrid Urbanist Channel, Coaldale Resident
- Tyler Eaton, Edwards Resident
- Michael Nutall, Friends of GJ Union Depot, Grand Junction Resident
- Brad Swartzwelter, Coal Creek Canyon Resident
- James Flattum, Greater Denver Transit (GDT) Co-Founder
- Richard Bamber, Greater Denver Transit (GDT) Co-Founder
- Stavros Roditis, Urbanist Advocate
- Luke Sponable, Rail Advocate
- Noah Sponable, Rail Advocate
- Daniel Bilka, All Aboard Northwest (AANW)
- Mike Christensen, Utah Rail Passengers Association (UtahRPA)

Reference: **Western Rail Concept**



**Key:** The proposed Eagle River Valley Service study segment is noted on the above map in orange. It spans the northern section of the Tennessee Pass Subdivision from Leadville to Dotsero as well as the Glenwood Springs Subdivision of Union Pacific's Central Corridor between Dotsero and Glenwood Springs.

**Other/Q&A:**

**Will this project slow down or distract from Mountain Rail?**

- No - this project will be complimentary of all Mountain Rail efforts, especially as much of the legwork may not need to be completed by CDOT/state agencies directly.
- This may be an excellent opportunity for a public-private partnership (P3) with potential for rapid results.

- This is about collaborating with an existing passenger rail operator that already has a lease to the Tennessee Pass Line and is interested in operating a passenger service on this line.
- The line is intact, and for relatively modest capital investment, could be brought back into service for passenger operations that would benefit all residents.

### How much will this project cost?

- The cost of the project will not be known with any precision until CDOT formally studies the line and delivers a Service Development Plan (SDP).
- While the 2014 CDOT Advanced Guideway System (AGS) feasibility study has planted a number in the minds of Coloradans that new mountain trains will cost 10's of billions of dollars, this is not remotely the cost to leverage existing rail.
- Based on back-of-the-napkin estimates outlining the known track work, signaling installation, and fleet procurement of state-of-the-art, fully-accessible rail vehicles, the cost to install a Leadville to Glenwood Springs service will cost only a tiny fraction of that amount, something between \$200M and \$400M, which is no small amount of money abstractly, but would be substantially cheaper than the ongoing Floyd Hill Project.
- SB-230 funds could be attributed as well.
- We recommend exploring untapped accommodations tax revenue or other potential tourist based revenue streams to further fund this project.

### What about oil trains?

- The return of oil trains to the Tennessee Pass Line is exceedingly unlikely, and new passenger services on the line would make the prospect for any through-freight return to the line even less likely.
- The Tennessee Pass Line has not been an economical route for the operations of heavy freight trains including oil trains for nearly 30 years due to punishingly-steep grades that are far more expensive for freight rail companies to operate over when other route options are available, and the line's owner has two other choices.
- The steep climb from Minturn to the Tennessee Pass summit combined with the duplication of routes available (created by the Union Pacific/Southern Pacific merger) was the primary reason that Union Pacific (UP) decided to cease operations in 1997 over Tennessee Pass.
- However, these steep grades are much less of a hindrance for passenger trains which can operate with much lighter, quieter, and low-carbon-impact vehicles.
- Further, the lessee who could operate the passenger service is not contractually permitted for running any through-freight trains by themselves; and Union Pacific, the owner, is unlikely to interchange twice with such an operation when they have their own superior routes.

- A commuter overlay from Glenwood Springs to Leadville would not make Tennessee Pass an attractive through-route for freight trains as nearly 100 additional miles between Leadville and Parkdale would still remain out of service.
- Filling the track capacity with quiet, modern, and low-emission passenger services would offer a much greater benefit to local residents and actually make it harder for through-freight trains to ever return to the line as they would use up track capacity.
- This is a unique opportunity for Colorado to create a passenger rail corridor that would not have to compete with inflexible through-freight service along most of the route.
- Therefore providing the opportunity for car-free ski vacations and cheaper commuting options for workers, residents, and visitors alike.
- When the Tennessee Pass Corridor returns as a passenger line, its stunning views of the Eagle and Arkansas River Valleys will secure its status as an international rail attraction in and of itself.
- The Glenwood Canyon section of rail between Dotsero and Glenwood Springs is already one of the most popular sections of Amtrak's long distance California Zephyr service.

### **What about the potential to convert the line to a trail?**

- The Union Pacific Railroad (UP) which owns the line has been very consistent that the potential removal of rails on Tennessee Pass is not on the table.
- In order for the UP to remove their rails, they would have to comply with Federal requirements around the abandonment process which is strictly regulated.
- US Federal Law states that before a railroad can abandon a line, they must first put the line up for sale so that other railroads who are interested would have the opportunity to bid on it.
- The UP is not interested in doing so as this would risk the line falling into the hands of their main competitor who would gain a major competitive advantage with access to an east/west transcontinental line that has clearances for intermodal double-stacks which are highly profitable (trains they cannot run via the Moffat Tunnel Line).
- The only other option would be for the UP to sell the line to the State of Colorado, and while this would be a great idea to future-proof passenger rail service, there is currently no budget or consensus at the Colorado State level that such a purchase would be in the public interest to decommission a high-value transportation corridor in order to build a trail for the purposes of recreation.
- The trail conversion would also be highly uneconomical - there is plenty of room for a trail adjacent to the rail line that could be constructed as a trail from scratch for a much lower cost than purchasing the line from the UP to be decommissioned.
- In Eagle County, a new trail would duplicate an already-existing trail that already spans nearly the full length of the Eagle Valley which likely accounts for the highest-demand section of the route.
- Thus, the prospect of converting the Tennessee Pass Line to a trail is not viable given that there is no appetite whatsoever for either the current owner to risk benefiting their

chief competitor nor is there a state interest in paying market price for the line only to dismantle it.

### What do quiet, modern, and low-emission rail vehicles look like?

- In America today, passenger trains are already operating without any loud locomotives but instead have smaller distributed motors that allow for flexible and quiet operations even over non-electrified Class-I freight railroads that usually prohibit overhead wire systems.
- The most popular design for a diesel multiple-unit set in the United States is by Stadler Rail, a Swiss company that manufactures Buy-America-compliant train sets in Salt Lake City that are currently running across the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex and Greater Los Angeles.
- The Stadler FLIRT diesel base variant complies with the most rigorous Tier-IV emissions standards, is extremely quiet, and is highly upgradable.
- These sets are modular, and have the ability to be upgraded with zero-emission motive power that can seamlessly switch between diesel motors and electrical power from overhead wires as trains are in motion, or can have their diesel equipment swapped out with lithium-ion batteries or hydrogen fuel cells.
- While less common in the US for diesel multiple units, other strong candidates include the German firm Siemens which offers a modern multiple-unit train called the Desiro which is currently running on Southern California's Sprinter service and the French firm Alstom which offers a similar type called the Coradia, both of which are quiet, modern, and low-emission vehicles which should be considered as well.
- For visuals of the Stadler FLIRT, would refer you to two YouTube videos:
  - [Interior View](#) w/ elegant, but weather-proofed appointments
  - [Exterior View](#) w/ quiet operations