



Denver's Union Station has become a system-wide transit hub as it serves the metro area's 2.8 million people.

RTD MITIGATES CONGESTION WITH MULTIMODAL TRANSIT

Denver's West Rail Line weathers challenges on its path to success

BY DEBORAH MÉNDEZ WILSON

For more than 30 years, the residents, stakeholders and elected officials in Denver, Colorado hoped to someday benefit from a faster transit route between the city's downtown and the metro area's western periphery. Thanks to planning, hard work and strategic outreach, the Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) shepherded the \$707 million West Rail Line project to a successful grand opening on budget and eight months ahead of schedule.

Since its debut in April 2013, the West Rail Line's popularity has grown, and the 12.1-mile light rail line has become an integral part of the surrounding landscape. With 11 stops, the line travels between Denver Union Station and the Jefferson County Government Center near Colorado's historic mining town of Golden.

The West Rail Line is part of RTD's FasTracks program, the largest transit expansion initiative in the United States, one whose hallmarks include regional collaboration among city, county, state and federal agencies and neighborhood associations. It also showcases an innovative public-private funding model that taps into local, state and federal grants as well as loans and private investments.

Challenges on the Horizon

Calls for a better transit solution were evident in Denver's first transit plan, which was published in the early 1970s. RTD completed several studies for options in the West corridor, and in 1988 purchased the Associated Rail line along 13th Avenue for future transit use, a savvy move

that trimmed construction costs and saved time on planning and execution farther down the line.

In 2001, the transit agency launched a study to consider both the positive and negative impacts of building a light rail line between Denver and Golden along the Associated Railroad and Denver Interurban Transit lines, which initiated an environmental impact statement. RTD wanted to understand the technical, environmental and community challenges and opportunities associated with using light rail to mitigate congestion issues expected in the corridor over the coming decades as the population grows.

The challenges would prove to be manifold. One was determining how best to traverse a well-established network of residential neighborhoods—some of them among the oldest and most diverse in the Denver area—for more than three miles. Another was ascertaining how to navigate through difficult economic times that posed cost increases and other unexpected dips in the road. The economic downturn and home mortgage crisis affected Denver-area families adversely through layoffs and plunging home values. Many homeowners owed more than their homes were worth. After acquiring the properties, RTD payments often went directly to lien holders.

RTD also faced hurdles across multiple jurisdictions as it sought to widen its transit right of way, including highway crossings and homes located directly along the alignment. To complete the project, the agency had to widen 13th Avenue, which runs parallel to the rail line, to accommodate the double-track light rail system and a 10-foot bike path. Compounding the transit agency's unpredictable hurdles was the fact that a number of residents had unknowingly encroached on RTD property through home expansions and renovations.

Convincing the Public

Public involvement is an important arrow in RTD's quiver of community outreach efforts during any project, and the West Rail Line offered many opportunities to generate local support.

"We knew we had our work cut out for us if we were to convince the public this was a sound decision and a project that would benefit the entire metro Denver region," said RTD General Manager and CEO Phil Washington, who was recently recognized by the American Public Transportation Association for his innovative, cost-effective and customer-focused initiatives to build projects and improve service to the public. "The West

Rail Line had to succeed or we risked public backlash over the region's support of our efforts to build out an extensive rail and bus rapid transit system with local sales-tax dollars."

Throughout the process, RTD held more than 150 meetings to keep the public informed of the rail line's development, design, station plans and other key issues. In addition to public meetings with residents, stakeholders, elected officials and local businesses, RTD's public outreach efforts included weekly construction updates, a monthly e-newsletter, email blasts, surveys, door-to-door communication, phone calls and informational pieces published in community newspapers and other print and electronic media.

Despite the decade-long project schedule, RTD was fortunate to have a consistent voice from start to finish. From 2001 through 2013, Public Information Manager Brenda Tierney oversaw the external communication efforts and was responsible for ensuring ongoing information was disseminated from the very beginning planning stages until the grand opening. Committed to keeping the residents informed, Brenda said, "We wanted everyone to know we were going to be in their communities for the next several years and were committed to keeping them informed and making sure they were fully aware of every step in the process."

Managing the Volume

While the mortgage and employment crises were outside RTD's control, RTD Manager of Real Property Susan Altes recognized that the lack of desired cash payments to homeowners created more angst than usual during the acquisition process. "The sheer volume of acquisitions required for the line's construction and operation was remarkable," said Susan. "We were trying to purchase land for the West Rail Line at the same time we were buying property for other FasTraks' initiatives, which put a heavy burden on our division. However, because of all of the prep work we did before the project broke ground, we were ready to work when we received the go-ahead, and that gave us a positive start."



Widening the transit right of way on 13th Avenue impacted highway crossings and homes located along the alignment.

With users captivated by scenic routes and picturesque views of the Rocky Mountains, ridership on the West Rail Line is on the rise.

RTD also worked closely with the Federal Transit Administration to ensure all of its property acquisitions and homeowner relocations were compliant with state and federal regulations. Because the project's right of way team planned carefully, a low number of acquisition challenges wound up in the courts. Of RTD's 193 property acquisitions (with 322 impacts), 36 condemnation petitions were filed, 27 settled ahead of trial, and nine—just five percent of the total acquisitions—required full court proceedings. Altogether, the transit agency handled 204 relocations, including two apartment buildings.

The list of achievements by RTD's real property team is extensive, and includes cost savings linked to ditch and water rights acquisitions, intergovernmental agreements on land exchanges, ditches, operation, maintenance, common use and occupancy, and the negotiation of federal approval on complex railroad rights of way and industrial and special-purpose property acquisitions.

In addition to preparing standards and procedures granting more than 500 license agreements, the team oversaw complex, multimillion-dollar real estate closings and escrow agreements. In many cases, they assisted engineers in identifying and quantifying value-engineering opportunities, including environmental impacts, and assisted with utility relocation agreements. And the team played an invaluable role in determining, preparing and recommending plans for excess or underused properties.

A Long-Term Vision

Other FasTracks initiatives include the renovation of Denver Union Station as a system-wide transit hub and the crown jewel of the RTD transit system, which serves a metro area of 2.8 million people. In May, RTD inaugurated a new underground bus concourse and launched the Free MetroRide shuttle service to complement an existing 16th Street Free MallRide, traveling along downtown Denver and connecting Denver Union Station with Civic Center Station. Over the summer, Denver's Union Station will open a boutique hotel, gourmet restaurants, shops and other



modern amenities for travelers, visitors and pedestrians. Dana Crawford, Denver's renowned preservationist and the namesake of the station's new Crawford Hotel, says the renovated train hall will be no less than "the city's living room and the gateway to the West" when it reopens.

Elsewhere in the FasTracks system, Eagle P3, the largest public-private transit partnership ever attempted in the U.S., is slated to debut in 2016. The multipronged project comprises the East Rail Line to Denver International Airport, the Gold Line to the communities of Arvada and Wheat Ridge, the first segment of the Northwest Rail Line to the city of Westminster, and a new commuter rail maintenance facility in Globeville.

Also slated to open in 2016 are the I-225 Rail Line through the city of Aurora to the east of Denver and the U.S. 36 bus rapid transit service between Denver and the city of Boulder, giving RTD its biggest year yet for project openings. The North Metro Rail Line is expected to open in 2018, and new Park-n-Rides, improved suburb-to-suburb bus connections, and new transit-oriented development also are part of the FasTracks program.

Ridership on the Rise

RTD inaugurated the West Rail Line in April 2013, and the light rail line is running smoothly as part of the agency's bus and rail

operations side. Ridership is on the rise and expected to grow as connecting lines join the system in 2016. Commuters and tourists alike are enthralled with the line's scenic route toward Jefferson County, which offers some of the best views of the Rockies west of Denver.

During its design and construction, the West Rail Line was described as being on the bleeding edge of what RTD set out to accomplish with the multibillion-dollar FasTracks program. Today, transit officials from Dallas, Los Angeles and other major metropolitan cities in the U.S. and abroad are examining the Denver model as they look to improve their own transit systems.

When it comes to initiating large transit projects, forging strong alliances and partnerships at the city, state and federal levels have made all the difference. The West Rail Line team blazed a formidable trail for the entire FasTracks program. 🌟



A longtime journalist and public relations professional, Deborah is a member of the RTD FasTracks public information team.