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Issue Backgrounder
2004-A

Why Slow Tracks Won't Help Denver

RTD's so-called "FasTracks" plan will cost billions and do nothing to relieve congestion or increase mobility.

Independence Institute • 14142 Denver West Parkway, Suite 185 • Golden, Colorado 80401 • 303-279-6536 • i2i.org/cad.aspx

Denver's Regional Transit District (RTD) wants to spend $4 billion—plus billions more in finance charges—building light-rail and commuter-rail lines. Yet documents published by the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) and RTD itself reveal that this plan will do almost nothing to reduce congestion, air pollution, or other urban problems.

RTD calls its proposal "FasTracks," but it is more accurate to call it "Slow Tracks," because it will take years to build the rail lines and, once built, the trains will run at only about 18 to 30 miles per hour.

Table One
The Cost of Slow Tracks
(millions of dollars)

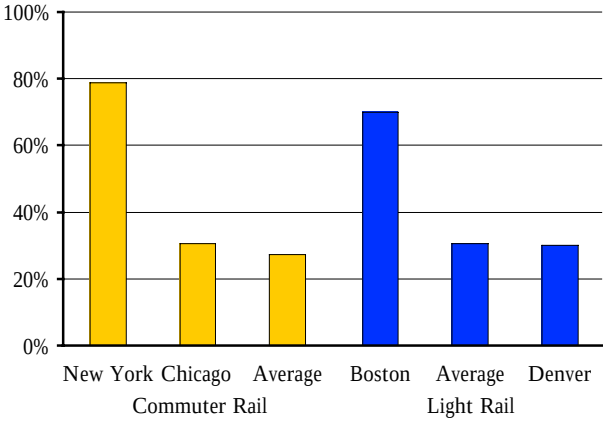
Corridor	Cost	Miles	Cost/Mile
Central LR	$112.5	0.8	$140.5
I-225 LR	456.5	10.5	43.5
East CR	701.0	23.6	29.7
North CR	438.9	18.0	24.4
Longmont CR	527.2	38.1	13.8
Boulder BRT	217.6	15.0	14.5
Gold LR	479.7	11.2	42.8
West LR	522.1	12.1	43.1
SW LR	161.5	2.5	64.6
SE LR	192.5	2.3	83.7
Total/average	$3,504.6	134.1	$26.1

Table one shows RTD's estimates of the cost of each proposed line (LR is light rail, CR commuter rail, BRT is bus rapid transit). As shown, the cost will average more than $26 million a mile—not including the cost of maintenance facilities that must be built for the new railcars.

For comparison, the Colorado Department of Transportation is spending less than $10 million per lane mile constructing 70 lane miles of freeway as part of the T-REX project. It might make sense to spend two to four times that amount building a mile of rail line if the rail lines carried more than the freeways. But they don't.

No light-rail or commuter-rail line in the nation carries as many people as a single freeway lane. The most productive commuter-rail line is in New York, carrying 79 percent of a freeway lane (figure one). But outside of New York the average commuter rail line carries just 16 percent of a freeway lane. The most productive light-rail line, in Boston, carries 71 percent of a freeway lane, but the average is just 30 percent and Denver's is slightly less than that.

Figure One
Percent of Freeway Lane Carried by Rail Transit



Source: U.S. DOT, 2002 data

Slow Tracks is also very expensive per rider. Table two shows the cost for every *new rider*, a Federal Transit Administration term for riders who previously were

not using transit. The table uses RTD's low estimates of the cost per ride and assumes that 40 percent of the expected riders are new riders. This is optimistic, as RTD says nearly 70 percent of its light-rail riders are former bus riders. This cost includes the annualized cost of construction plus the operation costs.

Table Two
Cost/New Ride and Annual Cost/New Commuter

Corridor	New Ride	New Commuter
Central LR	$22.38	$10,200
I-225 LR	18.50	8,900
East CR	13.20	6,300
North CR	22.86	11,000
Longmont CR	37.58	18,000
Boulder BRT	8.80	4,200
Gold LR	15.72	7,500
West LR	12.24	5,900
SW LR	21.20	10,200
SE LR	37.48	18,000

The table shows that each time a former auto user climbs aboard a Slow Tracks train, it will cost taxpayers $12 to $38. The table also shows the annual cost of attracting one commuter out of his or her car, calculated by multiplying the cost per ride by 480 (240 round trips). It would be less expensive to lease new cars for these commuters or to carry them (in groups of eight to ten) in stretch limousines. Stretch limousines would offer faster, more convenient, more comfortable service than rail transit, yet no one would support using tax dollars to give commuters rides in stretch limousines. So why should taxpayers support slower, more expensive rides on rail transit?

The lowest-cost project in table two is the Boulder bus-rapid transit route. The Federal Transit Administration defines *bus-rapid transit* as buses running on rail schedules, i.e., greater frequencies with fewer stops so they can run faster.

A 2001 report from the General Accounting Office says that transit agencies can start bus-rapid transit service on existing roads almost immediately at just 2 percent of the cost of building light rail. The report adds that bus-rapid transit costs less to operate and can go twice as fast as light-rail transit.

RTD brags that transit carries 30 percent of downtown commuters. But only 10 percent of jobs in the Denver metro area are located in downtown Denver. Regionwide, transit carries just 5.5 percent of commuters, meaning it carries less than 3 percent of commuters who do not work downtown. Slow Tracks is, in large part, a subsidy to downtown property owners at everyone else's expense.

DRCOG's *2025 Regional Transportation Plan*, which calls for building most of the rail lines proposed by RTD, says building those lines will cost more than half the region's transportation capital budget. Yet, after the lines are built, DRCOG predicts the share of commuters who ride transit will increase from 5.5 to just 5.6 percent, while the share of all travel that uses transit will increase from 2.0 to just 2.3 percent.

Spending more than half the region's transportation capital funds on a transit system that carries just 2.3 percent of travel will lead to a huge increase in congestion. DRCOG's 2025 plan says that the number of miles of congested roads in the metro area will increase by 90 percent. Spending money on rail transit instead of on congestion relief will double the time it takes you to get home from work.

Rail transit has not worked in other cities any better than in Denver. Despite Chicago's extensive rail network, Chicago transit carried 15 percent less transit riders and 34,000 fewer transit commuters in 2000 than in 1990. Washington, DC, has a beautiful subway system, yet Washington transit lost 22,000 commuters in the 1990s.

Without raising taxes, Denver can relieve traffic congestion and have better transit than Slow Tracks. This can be done by running bus-rapid transit routes on high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes. Buses and other high-occupancy vehicles would use these lanes for free, while low-occupancy vehicles could use them by paying a toll that would vary depending on the level of congestion. The varying tolls would keep these lanes congestion-free, allowing anyone to reach their destinations on time. A regional HOT-lane network would benefit both transit riders and auto users by relieving congestion and speeding up traffic for everyone. Fast Roads with No New Taxes will relieve congestion while High Taxes for Slow Tracks will not.