

RAIL Magazine's Priorities from the Mountain West

Local Leadership

1

If the progress of rail systems and plans in the mountain west offers any imperative lesson for passenger rail elsewhere, it's the value of local support and leadership in translating proposals into action. In Denver, Salt Lake City and Tucson, a variety of passenger rail projects have been completed or are currently under construction due to the broad-based support for those efforts in their communities. Rather than a force-fed insistence from public figures at the state or national level, the development of these projects has been fueled by a stream of willpower from local elected officials, community and business leaders and significant numbers of area citizens. That groundswell of approval makes possible long-term investments in service expansion – as witnessed in both Denver and Salt Lake City – as well as fostering an atmosphere for rail-oriented development to succeed. Simply put, without the community's buy-in early and often in the process, any passenger rail project faces a steep grade climb to reality and ultimate success.

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Bundling Benefits

It is often said that one good turn deserves another, and that old aphorism is all the more true when considering how to leverage an existing passenger rail service into a more enhanced vision for community mobility. The transit agencies in both Denver and Salt Lake City effectively positioned themselves for further growth by achieving success with their initial light-rail routes. In Utah, that has led to a massive expansion of the region's TRAX light-rail service, while also launching the FrontRunner commuter rail line. In neighboring Colorado, Denver's steadily-expanding light-rail system built the foundation for a regional, electrified commuter rail network, centered around a revitalized Union Station. In both instances, the momentum established from early returns galvanized the type of public support that led to long-term investment. A similar scenario could be poised to unfold in Tucson, where the forthcoming modern streetcar project could set the stage for intercity rail service to Phoenix and additional streetcar routes in the future.

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A Transit-Rich Environment

As essential to local support and building on success is a larger discussion of the conditions that make rail transit appealing and lasting in a community. It's more than selecting a high-profile corridor to serve as a test case to introduce – or reintroduce, in most cases – rail services. Instead, the region must undertake a comprehensive and representative look at how rail would serve the community's long-term vision for prosperity. Advantages made possible by rail transit – such as alternatives to traffic congestion, rail-oriented development and connectivity – must be calculated against capital and operating costs, alternative options – bus rapid transit, for example – fiscal tradeoffs and a host of other concerns. Such an approach enlivens civic discourse and allows rail transit to be seen by the community as a predictable and responsive resource, instead of a potentially controversial contrivance. From there, corridors, routes and stations will follow.

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Federal Backing, Not Prescriptions

In as much as communities in the mountain west have been able to plan, implement and expand passenger rail options through strong support from local voters and their corresponding officeholders, the various projects in Denver, Salt Lake City and Tucson all benefited from investment from federal surface transportation programs. That funding is crucial to leveraging local investment sources to make rail projects responsive and efficient assets that serve their communities for centuries. And yet, any federal programs too burdened by stringent categories for use fail to recognize the uniqueness of every community and impose a one-size-fits-all mentality that could well doom a host of otherwise viable projects. Our policy-makers and elected officials in Washington must be mindful of this inherent reality, and channel investment to support good ideas rather than penalizing innovation by those most directly connected to local needs.

5

Infrastructure as Assets

When considering the benefits and costs of passenger rail infrastructure – things like stations, trackbeds and catenary systems – it can be easy to focus on the immediate figures associated with each element. The capital cost of a station is weighed against the number of riders it generates, or perhaps how many cars can park at an adjacent park-and-ride lot. Meanwhile, the expenses of poles and wires to power light-rail and commuter trains is factored against the relatively cheaper cost of diesel-powered equipment. And, of course, these aspects are important and real. But responsible passenger rail decision-making begs a larger question. While the number of passengers travelling through a station as the product of its cost is a fundamental equation that must be addressed, as important is the amount of value that station produces in economic output – the number of jobs created nearby because employees have access to convenient transportation, or the development opportunities spawned by riders looking to find retail, entertainment and housing near a train stop. Moreover, successful rail-oriented development locations produce long-term property and sales tax revenue that often ends up drawing near or exceeding the cost of constructing or operating the system, or both. At the same time, the marginally greater cost of utilizing electrified vehicles, or installing an ascetically-pleasing rail corridor can provide lasting and substantial benefits in terms of air quality, ridership and a sense of community pride. Passenger rail projects must be afforded the opportunity to claim credit for these benefits at every stage of the process, from planning and design to installation and operation. 