



# Travel by Train: Denver Union Station to Play Central Role in Region's Innovative FasTracks Program

By Scott Bogren

In 1952, just as passenger rail travel across the country began its near half-century slide, a bold neon sign was affixed to the Beaux-Arts façade of Denver's Union Station – an arched “Union Station” with “Travel by Train” beneath, framing the station's magnificent clock. This signature sign and its mandate has stood sentinel over an architectural and rail treasure that by the mid-1990s seemed destined to host few – if any – trains, but that recently enjoyed an amazing revival that now sees it the hub of an entire regional transportation revitalization. Soon, that sign may need to be revamped to include an “s” at the end of the word train as the region's ambitious FasTracks regional transportation plan proposes 122 new miles of light and commuter rail tracks, all with Denver's Union Station at the

system's fulcrum.

Soon, Denver's Union Station may not only be the heart of a regional surface transportation network, it will illustrate the unique public-private partnership being deployed to finance its renovation. Using Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement financing – a national first, combined with Transportation Infrastructure Financing and Improvement Act (TIFIA) investment, plans are underway to build a 50-acre mixed-use development zone around the station, as well as construct a new light-rail terminal with three tracks and two platforms. The intercity and commuter rail section of the station will be expanded to eight passenger tracks and platforms.

If all goes as planned, Denver's historic Union Station will find itself

recast as the center of a regional transit overhaul in 2014 – just as the current structure celebrates its 100th birthday.

## History at 17<sup>th</sup> and Wynkoop

For 130 years, a majestic rail station has stood at 17<sup>th</sup> and Wynkoop in downtown Denver. Today's historic Denver Union Station, however, is the second iteration of the facility.

The first Denver Union Station, completed in 1881, brought together passengers from four predecessor venues that served single railroads and that necessitated time-consuming transfers between stations. Once the original Union Station was completed, only Moffat Station – built in 1906 to serve local businessman David Moffat's Denver, Northwestern & Pacific line – arose

to compete, though service to Moffat ebbed beginning in the 1940s (today, Moffat Station remains abandoned).

The original Denver Union Station featured a soaring gothic clock tower and tracks stretching out nearly to the Platte River. Fire destroyed significant parts of the passenger service part of the facility in 1894, and the structure that stands today was eventually constructed in 1914 – a Beaux-Arts, Colorado granite building on a steel frame.

The 1920s and '30s were the busiest epoch for the station, with upwards of 80 daily trains calling in Denver. Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, Harry Truman and William Howard Taft visited the station during this period. It wasn't until 1958 that traffic at Denver's Stapleton Airport surpassed that at Union Station.

### FasTracks to the Future

Denver Union Station's rehabilitation is one facet in the region's FasTracks transportation expansion plan – a more than \$6 billion, dozen-year effort tying together the Denver and Boulder regions and building upon both the momentum and public support engendered by its predecessor transportation investment program, T-Rex.

T-Rex (a hybrid of transportation expansion) was a unique combination of transit and highway infrastructure improvements, with a price ticket of around \$1.7 billion, based around the I-25 and I-225 corridors. Strictly speaking, T-Rex added nearly 20 miles of double-tracked light rail line and significantly added to local highway capacity. More importantly, T-Rex's success directly led to the 2004 passage of the FasTracks referendum with Denver-area voters.

Like T-Rex, FasTracks is not a single project, but a set of coordinated projects designed to work in concert to improve surface transportation throughout the region. The FasTrack projects include:

- West Corridor Light Rail – A 12.1 mile, 12-station light-rail line that will follow an old rail right-of-way along the median of the east-west U.S. Route 6. The line is scheduled to open in 2013.

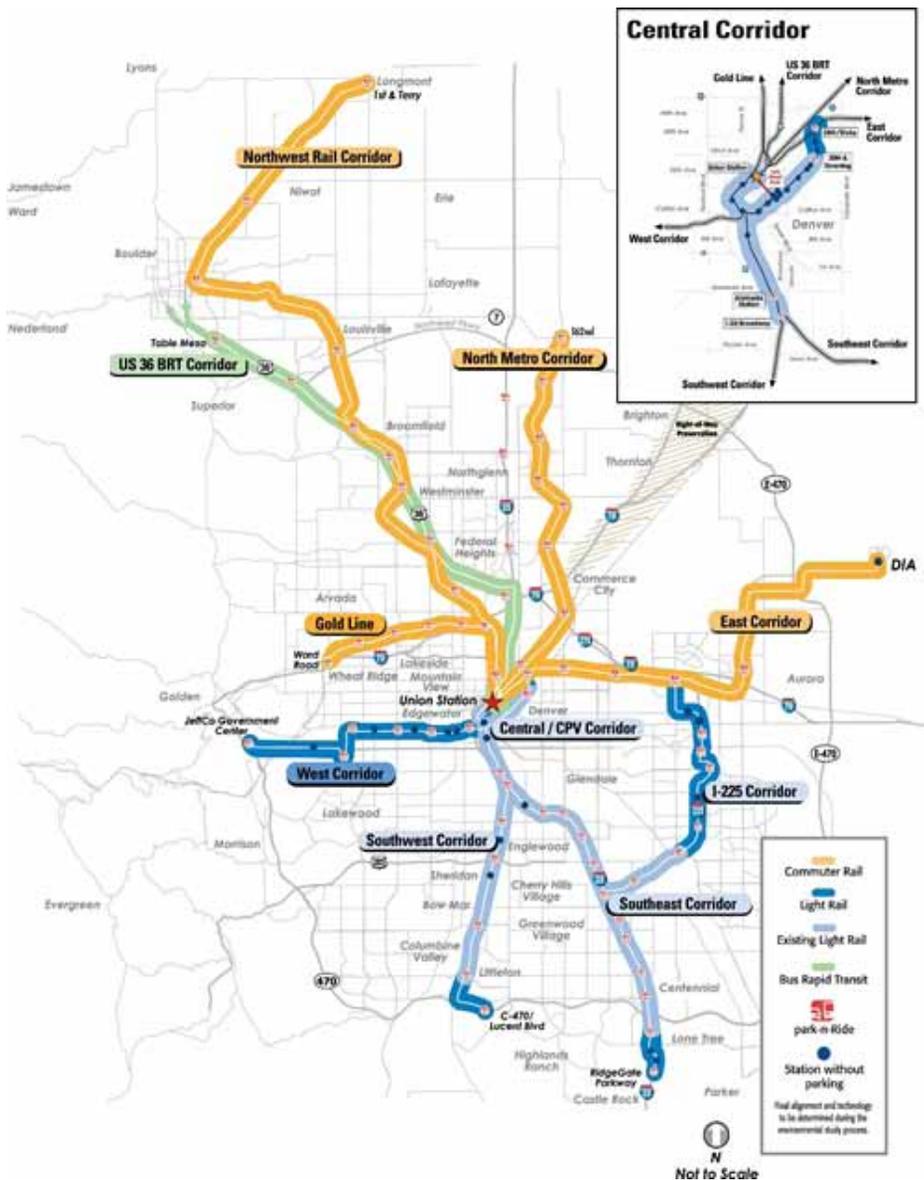


Denver's original Union Station – built in 1881 – was severely damaged by a 1894 fire.



Union Station will anchor a 50-acre mixed-use development district (above) and feature revitalized platforms for intercity, commuter rail and light rail passengers (below).





- Light Rail Extensions – FasTracks includes a series of vital extensions to light rail lines that have already been completed in the Denver metro area.

To accomplish this aggressive infrastructure-building program, the Denver Regional Transit District (RTD) has created the Eagle P3 Project – an agreement with a concessionaire or group of firms known as Denver Transit Partners (DTP). DTP, as part of the Eagle P3 Project, is required to design, build, finance, operate and maintain the East Rail Line, Gold Line, parts of the Northwest Rail Line and a commuter-rail maintenance facility. The commuter rail routes are expected to utilize electrically-powered multiple unit (EMU) vehicles, allowing for both higher passenger capacity and emissions-free operations, the latter a key factor in a region that has always prided itself on protecting the environment. According to RTD, this contract structure allows it to retain all assets while shifting much of the risk of designing and building the project to DTP – which has arranged for \$450 million of private financing. RTD can thus spread out large, up-front costs over 30 years, as well as make payments to DTP based on their performance of the operation and maintenance of the project.

In late August, the Obama Administration committed \$1 billion to Denver's Eagle P3 commuter rail project, where it hopes to create more than 4,700 new jobs, ease congestion and bring new transportation choices to the region. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood was on-hand to announce the funding in Arvada, Colo.

“This project we are funding will be a model for the country and maybe for the world,” said US Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood on Sept. 1, 2011, as he and other officials spoke to the press about a recent \$1 billion federal commitment to the FasTracks project.

“When it comes to private-sector involvement in transportation,” said Federal Transit Administrator Peter Rogoff at the Sept. 1 announcement, “Denver is the model.”

“I think the Eagle P3 rail line is a great example of what we can achieve when the federal government, local communities, and private companies

- Northwest Commuter Rail Corridor – a 41-mile, seven-station commuter rail project between Denver, Boulder and Longmont that is expected to open in 2018.
- US 36 Bus Rapid Transit Corridor – an 18-mile, six-station express bus line running along Route 36 between Denver and Boulder. This BRT project will be completed in two phases, with the first phase to be completed by 2010 and the second by 2018.
- East Commuter Rail Corridor – set to open in 2015, the East Corridor is a 23-mile commuter rail line between downtown Denver, Aurora and Denver International Airport. Construction started in August 2010 and is expected to be completed in 2016.
- North Metro Commuter Rail Corridor – a 28-mile, eight-station commuter rail line that is planned to run along an existing railroad right-of-way from Denver to Thornton. The North Metro Corridor line will open in 2019.
- I-225 Light Rail Corridor – a new 10.5-mile light rail line running through Aurora that will link the Southeast light rail and East Corridor commuter rail lines. The project will include seven new stations and will open in 2018.
- Gold Line Commuter Rail – an 11-mile electric commuter rail corridor that will run from Denver's Union Station to communities such as Wheat Ridge and Arvada. The line will have eight stations and is expected to open in 2016.

work together toward a sustainable future,” said LaHood.

The downturn in the economy has placed some of the FasTracks proposal in jeopardy. Diminished returns from the local sales tax approved by voters in 2004 finds the plan short upwards of \$2 billion. The need to reach back out to local voters to increase the sales tax seems likely, but local transportation leaders and advocates, as well as local elected officials, have been wary about such a step. At the Sept. 1 announcement of the \$1 billion in federal investment, Denver Mayor Michael Hancock indicated that he supports placing this new 8-county referendum on the ballot in 2012.

“My hope is that we go to voters in 2012,” said Hancock.

### **Union Station: Where It All Comes Together**

Though not specifically a FasTracks project, the revitalization of Denver’s Union Station is a key to the ambitious project’s success. When Denver Union Station’s rehabilitation is completed in 2014, the new station will offer a new light-rail station serving three lines of the Regional Transit District’s growing light-rail network. The station will also be home to the new commuter rail service, with eight tracks reserved (including two tracks for Amtrak’s intercity trains). Finally, completing its intermodal tapestry, the station will house a 22-bay underground bus facility for local, regional and intercity buses.

“We want people to see this historic local icon as the hub of a new way to get around Denver, and around the region,” says Jerome Nery, Denver Union Station Project Manager for the Denver Regional Transit District (RTD). “This facility was once the center of this community and we think it will be again.”

The revitalized station will not only serve as the hub of the light-rail, commuter rail and bus networks, but it will offer direct connection to Denver International Airport (DIA), which is located nearly an hour east of the city and to which travel is often hampered by snarled highway traffic.

“Denver residents have been looking for a fast, convenient connection be-

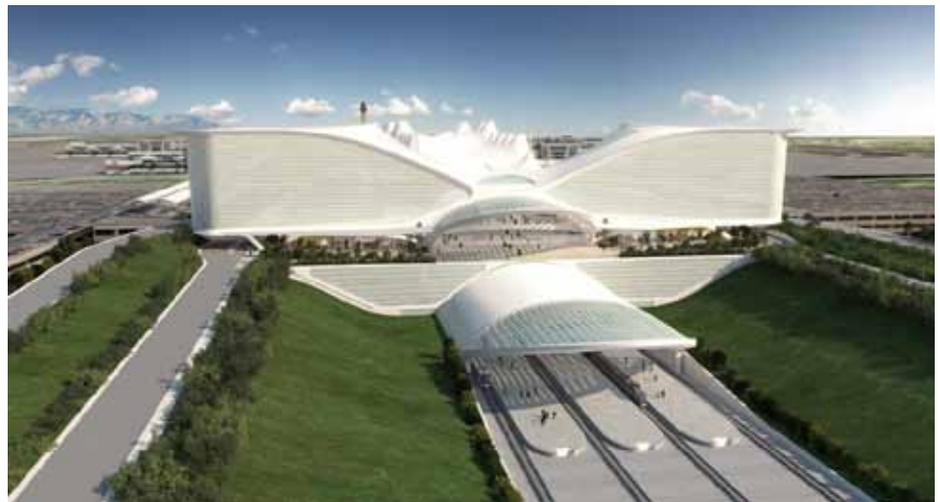
tween DIA and downtown,” says Nery. “In many respects, Union Station and DIA are the bookends of our emerging regional transportation network.” Eventually, plans call for DIA passengers to be able to check baggage at Union Station for their flights, adding another level of customer service to the plan.

One of the first phases of the station’s renewal was launched in August with the opening of the new light rail station adjacent to the site’s Millennium Bridge.

“The vision of creating a new bustling urban center and multimodal transportation hub is unfolding right before your eyes with the dedication of this new light rail station this morning,” said Denver Union Station Project Authority President Elbra Wedgeworth at the station’s grand opening on Au-



Union Station’s new light-rail hub (above) has already been completed, while the East Corridor’s terminal at Denver International Airport (middle) and Union Station will serve as high-profile bookends of the region’s first commuter rail line.



A rendering of the 18th Street corridor in downtown Denver depicts the redevelopment efforts around Union Station, as well as the underground bus facility serving intercity, regional and local bus routes.

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Passengers on Amtrak’s two daily long-distance trains that call on Denver – the eastbound and westbound *California Zephyr* – are no longer using Union Station, as a temporary station nearby Coors Field has been deployed to allow the significant construction underway at Union Station. These platforms will be available again in 2014.

Beyond the specifics of all the new and upgraded train and bus service that it will host, Denver Union Station is also a 20-acre, public-private mixed-use development that promises to fundamentally change the neighborhood in which the station sits. RTD owns much of the land surrounding the station and plans on plowing the proceeds from selling off parcels of land back into funding the Union Station redevelopment.



### Once Again, Travel by Train

In 1881, Denver Union Station established its presence in the Mile High City as the venue through which much of the region’s passenger transportation flowed. With the advent of the ambitious FasTracks passenger rail infrastructure plan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the station finds itself on the cusp of not only reliving its past glory – but being a central element in the travel lives of thousands of Denver residents every day. 

The RTD’s light-rail network already provides extensive service in the region, especially to Denver’s southern suburbs. The system’s C and E routes have served Union Station since 2002.

