

Leading from the Front



By Rich sampson

On Aug. 2, a light-rail train filled with elected officials, community and business leaders and other dignitaries eased out of the Daybreak Parkway station in Utah's Jordan Valley, southwest of downtown Salt Lake City. Although the train hardly kept its planned operating schedule due to elongated celebrations at each stop, and bypassed the region's nexus of commerce, culture and activity – downtown Salt Lake City – altogether, the trip was of far greater symbolic importance: the twin openings of the Mid-Jordan and West Valley lines signified one of the nation's largest and most rapid U.S. rail transit expansions in recent times.

As many communities and regions navigate the challenging economic conditions facing the entire country over the past several years, and others question their commitment to any forms of new mobility infrastructure, the metropolitan region along Utah's Wasatch Front mountain range is all the more

dedicated to consistently improving its transit network, with its TRAX light-rail and FrontRunner commuter rail systems leading the charge. In just more than a decade, the region has transformed its vision for connectivity through strong, community-driven investment, a dynamic and proactive approach to new routes and services, and an increasing reliance on a robust set of transit options to drive economic development.

Changing Expectations

There's a predictable narrative that often accompanies the arc of a rail system's development, particularly for new light-rail operations. Initially, a handful of concerned citizens and local elected officials raise concerns about limited mobility in a community or region, and suggest a route or corridor that might serve as a starter service for a broader network in the future. As plans are devised and investment studied, skepticism arises within the community about ridership numbers, cost and the overall

likelihood of success. Some leaders protest and predict the system will never enter their neighborhoods or villages. Corresponding adjustments are made to mollify some of these concerns and the service nears its launch date, but there's a sense of guarded optimism about how the project will turn out until the first paying riders are aboard.

Seemingly, just as soon as the first trains hit the rails, opinions begin to change. A new developer opens a mixed-use project adjacent to a station, and the system is an economic development generator. Filled park-and-ride lots become alternatives to congested highways. Fans heading to or from a sporting event have a more convenient way to reach the game. And communities once dead-set against a route in their boundaries line-up to welcome expansions, and local voters find it easier to support new investment to grow the system.

This archetype of light-rail systems has played out time and again in places like San Diego, Calif., Denver, Colo.,

and Dallas, Texas, – and is now underway in newer entrants to the light-rail experience, such as Charlotte, N.C., and Norfolk, Va. It’s a tale that is just as true in the Salt Lake City region. As early as the mid-1980s, local officials were discussing plans for a light-rail line between downtown Salt Lake City and its southern suburbs, as an alternative to the increasingly congested Interstate 15, but opposition stifled most of the plans. And although the region’s transit provider – the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) – had secured a former freight rail right-of-way for an eventual light-rail line in 1988, the effort once again stalled.

It wasn’t until the 1995 announcement that Salt Lake City had been selected to host the 2002 Winter Olympic games that a local light-rail system transformed from discussion to designs. The service would utilize the previously-purchased corridor between downtown and the communities of Murray and Sandy south of Salt Lake City, and also include a branch to the University of Utah. The two routes would provide access to many of the downtown facilities used in the Olympics, while offering parking at outlying stations for the games’ hundreds of thousands of spectators.

Construction was underway in 1997, and just two years later, the north-south line between downtown and Sandy was in operation. The four stations of the University Line opened in 2001, meeting targets to begin service on the route in advance of the Olympics. Working in concert, the relatively new light-rail system – dubbed TRAX by the UTA – carried more than 1.4 million riders during the 16-days of competition and ceremonies, while also cementing its role with local residents as a key facet of Utah’s transportation network. In a five-year timeframe, the region’s vision for metropolitan mobility had shifted substantially – made possible by the groundwork laid in the initial TRAX system.

“Our region realized very quickly not only the value, but also the possibilities of a fully-realized rail transit network, which was only compounded by the role of TRAX during the Olympics,” says UTA President and CEO John English, who has overseen the agency

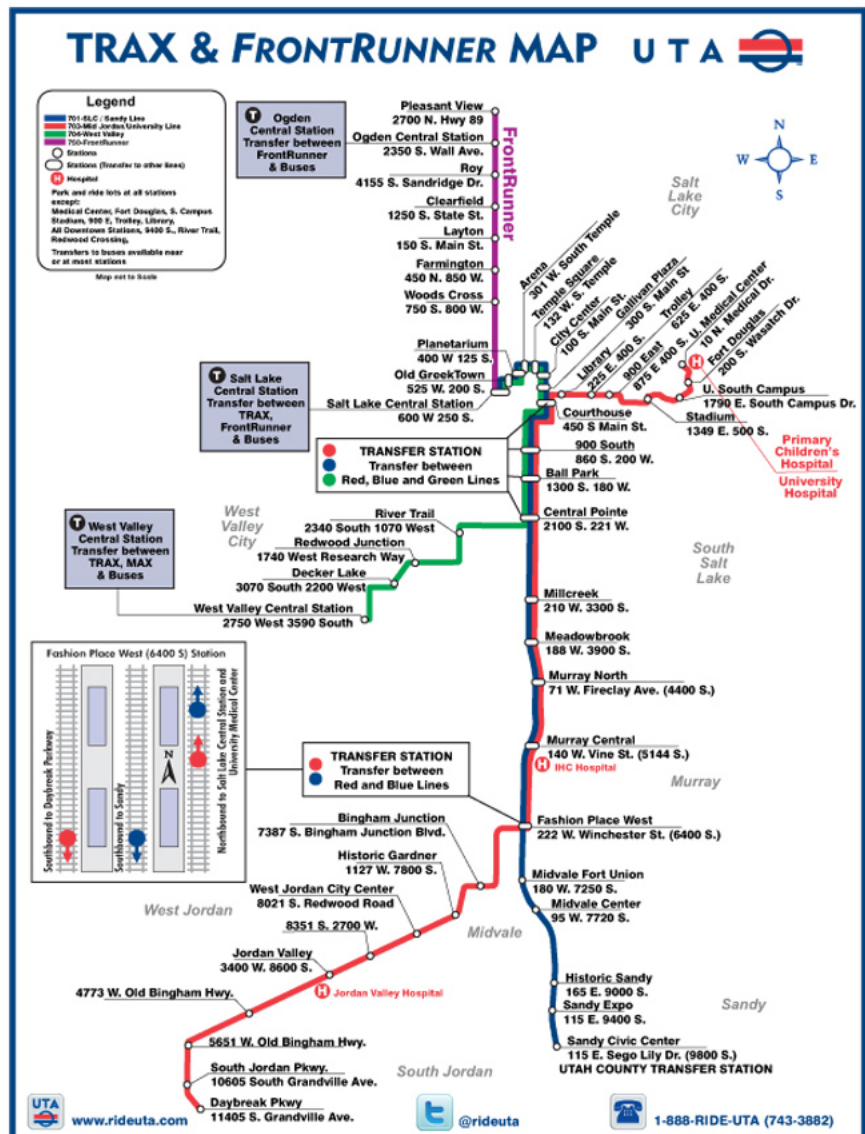
since 1997. “Our early success became a catalyst to an expanded presence for transit – not only TRAX light rail, but also commuter rail and regional bus service as well.”

Turning Momentum Into Action

With momentum for a robust transit network established by TRAX’s initial success in mobilizing the Olympics and providing a reliable and effective option for commuting and other travel needs, the UTA and local leaders went to work leveraging that foundation into new routes and services. The work began modestly, with a three-station expansion of the University Line to the University Medical Center in 2003, followed by approval for a corresponding three top addition of the main north-south line in early 2006 to reach the

new intermodal transit facility dubbed Salt Lake Central Station. In addition to linking UTA TRAX trains with the many of the agency’s local and regional bus routes, as well Amtrak’s *California Zephyr* and private intercity bus carriers, Central Station would also serve as the initial southern terminus of the UTA’s FrontRunner commuter rail (see side box at right for further details – ed.)

Building on a proven track record of developing and completing new passenger rail projects, area voters rewarded the work of the UTA and area leaders with a substantial and dedicated stream of local investment in the form of the FrontLines 2015 initiative. Approved by Salt Lake County voters on Nov. 7, 2006, FrontLines introduced a new \$.0025 sales tax to support new transit capital projects in the region.





UTA officials worked with the Salt Lake County Council to craft a priority list for the new projects, and settled upon four new TRAX routes, an extension of the FrontRunner line south to Provo, as well as bus rapid transit routes and regional bus enhancements. The local investment also attracted significant federal funding, amounting to \$500 million to support the FrontLines 2015 campaign.

“The approval of the local sales tax to support FrontLines was a powerful affirmation by our residents of where we’re heading,” says English. “It not only made it possible to secure the federal investment to support these projects, but reduced our overall timeline to implement them, which is both a long-term cost savings and more rapid introduction of service to meet our mobility needs.”

In 2008, construction began on the first two TRAX extensions supported by FrontLines: a four-station route from the Central Pointe station on the north-south line to West Valley, and a longer 10-station line connecting the Fashion Place West stop on the north-south line through the Jordan Valley to Daybreak Parkway. After its Aug. 7, 2001 opening to the public, the expansions added more than 15 new miles and 14 new stations to the TRAX network, and add to the existing network’s nearly 60,000 daily passengers – already dwarfing the 19,000 riders projected for the initial TRAX system. Just as important, both expansions were completed a year ahead of schedule and 20 percent under budget. The new expansions also allowed UTA to introduce color-coded route assignments to its TRAX map, contributing to the vision of a more fully formed transit network.

“It’s amazing how fast this project got done,” said Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon. “It was just a few years ago that we voted on this as the mayors in the county and here we are several years later and it’s done.”

“You look at each of the stations, and not only are they convenient to the business parks, the Maverik Center, Valley Fair Mall,” said West Valley City Mayor Mike Winder, “but they are really opportunities for transit-oriented development, economic development, new jobs and growth in West Valley.”



Reason for Optimism

Even though the debuts of the West Valley and Jordan Valley TRAX lines substantially increased rail transit service along the Wasatch Front, the UTA is hardly finished upgrading its portfolio of rail lines. Under construction is a new five-station route to Salt Lake City International Airport and the southern expansion of FrontRunner commuter rail to Provo, home of Brigham Young University. Both projects are expected to be completed by 2015, in keeping with the provisions of the FrontLines 2015 effort.

Additionally, the UTA is moving forward with plans to extend its original north-south light-rail line from its current terminus in Sandy to the city of Draper along the right-of-way owned by the transit agency. Utility relocation work has already begun, and the project's six new stations could open as early as 2014.

"We are proud of our record of building every one of our TRAX lines ahead of schedule, under budget and significantly exceeding our ridership expectations," says UTA General Manager Mike Allegra. "And we expect to continue that on these projects as well."

At the same time, the UTA is currently undergoing final design and engineering for the region's first street-car route. The project will connect the TRAX Central Pointe station and the Sugar House commercial district along a two-mile route serving six new stops. In October 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation awarded \$26 million in investment under its TIGER II program to match local funds to support the project. Construction is expected to begin in late 2011, with service underway in 2013.

And although the primary focus of the TRAX and FrontRunner services have been to meet the travel needs in a steadily-growing region, rail-oriented development projects at and around rail stations is finding greater importance during the current economic climate. As part of the Jordan Valley project, local land developer Kennecott Land contributed \$13 million in property and investment to support the new line, where the company completed a mixed-use development at the Daybreak Parkway

FrontRunner Commuter Rail

As the UTA was moving forward with plans to expand its TRAX light-rail network in the 21st century's first decade, the agency was also working to connect the broader region along the Wasatch Front between Ogden and Provo, where most of Utah's population resides. To do so, the agency's planners targeted an asset that had been connecting Utah for more than a century: the rail corridor which linked Ogden and Provo with the original transcontinental railroad in Salt Lake City. Working with local elected officials and community leaders, the UTA determined that a new commuter rail service would not only unite Utah's major population centers, but also leverage the existing TRAX system to enhance regional connectivity.

To initiate commuter rail service as rapidly as possible, the agency selected the northern segment of the corridor between Salt Lake City and Ogden to inaugurate the concept. The UTA negotiated with the Union Pacific Railroad to purchase a portion of its right-of-way along the line to construct new tracks and infrastructure for commuter rail operations – a decision that took advantage of the Union Pacific's wide right-of-way – originally constructed as the Utah Central Railroad in 1870 – but wouldn't

generally interfere with existing freight rail traffic, benefiting both modes. The purchase also marked one of the largest public right-of-way acquisitions in the nation's history, at 44 miles.

Construction started on the new railroad in 2005 and service – dubbed the FrontRunner in honor of the operation's presence along the Wasatch Front – began on April 26, 2008. FrontRunner trains connect with their TRAX light-rail counterparts at Salt Lake Central Station, along with Amtrak's California Zephyr. Today the region benefits from high-frequency service on the route, with FrontRunner operating 35 roundtrips each weekday, with trains departing every half hour during rush hours and hourly during non-peak times and on Saturdays. More than 4,600 riders use the route each weekday, and trains serve five additional stops between Ogden and Salt Lake city, with another three daily roundtrips connecting Ogden with Pleasant View, 20 miles to the north. FrontRunner is operated with a fleet of MPXpress diesel locomotives, Bombardier BiLevel passenger cars and vintage single-level coaches acquired from New Jersey Transit.

Building on the success established by the FrontRunner's north segment, UTA is currently constructing its southern version to reach Provo by 2015. The expansion will once again utilize the Union Pacific's right-of-way, stretching 45 miles from Salt Lake Central Station and six intermediate stations to Provo. The FrontRunner south extension is made possible through the local sales tax reference approved by voters in the FrontLines effort in 2006. Future extensions may continue the route north from Pleasant City to Brigham City and south from Provo to Payson and Nephi in coming years.



terminal. The public-private partnership is seen as a reflection of new opportunities to leverage the inherent value of the region's transit network.

"The lines represent an unbelievable exercise in public-private partnership," says Don Whyte, president of Kennecott Land. "I don't think there's another transit authority in the country that could have pulled together what happened here."

Progress from a Promise

In just over a decade, the UTA and its TRAX light-rail system have transitioned from a single starter light-rail route with a healthy share of detractors to a vibrant and rapidly-expanding transit system seen as a source of pride and accomplishment for an entire region. Fuelled by a medal-worthy performance during the 2002 Olympics and a more lasting presence in the daily lives of thousands of Utahans, the system rightly received credit for both its real value and potential for success from those who matter most: residents

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making their support known in the voting booth. That measure of accomplishment is what sinks in the most for the UTA and its leaders like John English.

"Nothing has been more crucial to what we've achieved with TRAX and FrontRunner than the support of

the residents throughout our region," says English. "The credit is all theirs in rewarding us with the faith of their investment, and we're more determined than ever to make sure we keep it up to honor our promise to them."

Sugar House Streetcar

Having already installed the TRAX light-rail and FrontRunner commuter rail services, the UTA is ready to expand its portfolio of rail transit options through the Sugar House Streetcar. A two-mile streetcar line will utilize an abandoned freight rail right-of-way owned by the UTA to link the TRAX Central Pointe station with the Sugar House business district in South Salt Lake City. The agency is working with both Salt Lake City and the city of South Salt Lake City to develop the project, which will serve seven stops and operate every 15 minutes during peak service hours and every half hour during non-peak periods.

The Sugar House Streetcar is expected to attract 3,000 daily riders when it opens in 2013 and spur 4,000 new households and 7,700 new jobs along its corridor, totaling \$1.2 billion in rail-oriented development. In October 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation awarded the project \$26 million in investment, while local sources will cover the remaining \$11.2 million cost. The project also includes the \$18.4 million value of the right-of-way.



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- Proposed Station
- Streetcar Route and potential Parley's Trail Route
- Potential Mixed-Use Development
- Alternative or Potential Future Route / Stop

STREETCAR South Salt Lake to Sugar House