Re-Imagining the Frontier:
The Denver Region’s Continued Rail Ambition

By Rich Sampson

In our 28th Edition of RAIL Magazine, Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren explored the development of the Denver region’s FasTracks multi-year, multi-million dollar public-private partnership effort to deliver a 103-mile commuter rail network to the area over the next decade, along with adding another 22.6 miles of light rail to the Regional Transit District’s existing system and a new 18-mile Bus Rapid Transit line. Bogren’s profile also discussed the redevelopment of Denver’s historic Union Station. Additionally, this piece in the 29th Edition narrowed in more closely on the public-private partnership aspect of the FasTracks initiative. Both these articles provide valuable background for this update report — ed.

Amid a landscape dominated by grassy meadows, rolling hills and a meandering creek, a curving glass-and-steel structure is emerging from Colorado’s high plains. The forthcoming passenger rail station at Denver International Airport (DIA) pairs with the signature white tent roof of the facility’s main terminal to create a physical and figurative link to the city’s skyline — staged against the Rocky Mountains — about 25 miles to the southwest.

Such ambitious architecture in a location where air travelers on final approach can look down on pastures is quite intentional, reflecting Denver’s ambitious and unique frontier mindset. It’s a vision that not only applies to the city’s renowned system of parks and outdoor spaces or well-established neighborhoods brimming with breweries and bookstores, but also to its burgeoning rail transit network — including its new electrified regional rail line to DIA, set to open in 2016.

Much Accomplished, More to Come

Since our last look at Denver’s ambitious FasTracks campaign, the first returns of the sweeping effort are now evident. The first
The 12.1-mile route serves 11 new stations between the revitalized Union Station and the Jefferson County Government Center near Golden. The W Line – part of the Regional Transit District’s (RTD) six-line light-rail network – is averaging more than 14,000 riders each weekday, steadily building towards its 2030 projection of 30,000 daily passengers.

The W Line’s debut proved to be a precursor to completion of the three-year, $900 million restoration and reformatting of the historic 1914 Denver Union Station. The project included numerous transportation improvements, ranging from new platform and ticketing areas for Amtrak’s transcontinental California Zephyr route between Chicago, Ill., and Emeryville, Calif., to the installation of a larger, three-platform light-rail station for the RTD’s C, E and W lines. The revitalized station also includes the largest regional and local bus facility in the Mountain West, featuring 22 boarding gates for 16 RTD bus routes. During rush hours, a bus departs the station every 48 seconds. Moreover, Union Station will serve as the terminus for the four RTD commuter rail routes currently under construction.

Beyond the station’s mobility implication are its development impacts. The revitalization transformed most of the building’s underused upper floors into the 122-room Crawford Hotel, while its expansive Great Hall and adjoining hallways host the hotel’s registration area along with 10 restaurant and three retail businesses. And while the revitalization effort enhanced Union Station beyond its historic grandeur, the development spurred by the facility’s multifaceted mobility op-
The remarkable vision for the Central Platte Valley Commons district (see above map) surrounding Denver Union Station is well underway in its transition from renderings (above left) to reality (below).

tions is even more lavish. More than 70 acres of property – much of it reclaiming old rail adjacent to Union Station no longer needed as freight railroads now sort and classify their trains elsewhere on the outskirts of Denver – are currently undergoing redevelopment as the city’s Central Platte Valley Commons district, with the ultimate economic impact likely to be measured in the billions dollars, as glass and concrete-clad buildings surround the historic station and its futuristic station canopies.

“We need to embrace a culture of transit. Not just mass transit, but you see a lot of focus on bikes, bike sharing, and the like,” says Paul Washington, Executive Director of Mayor Michael Hancock’s Office of Economic Devel-
development. “How we develop this city is in the spirit of sustainability and verticality. So we want to be a much more dense city and grow up rather than out.”

“Public projects, like arenas, aren’t enough to drive the economy. But infrastructure, like FasTracks, helps change the face of the region,” adds Jennifer Bradley, a fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program.

“Denver was well positioned because it started to create a walkable, lively downtown neighborhood 15 years ago at a time no one could see the trend. Denver didn’t chase the trend; the trend came to it.”

(For an extensive historical look at redevelopment efforts connected to Union Station, read this extensive coverage from the Denver Post – ed.)

Regional Rail for Colorado

As we noted in The Commentary of the 30th Edition of RAIL, the phrase commuter rail evokes notions of East Coast hustle and bustle that seem out of place in a city like Denver. Instead, the four-route system of lines currently under construction by the RTD’s FasTrack’s effort could be better understood as a regional rail network. To be sure, many riders of these lines will indeed be office workers taking the train into downtown Denver via Union Station in the morning and heading back home in the evening. At the same time, other passengers will be headed outbound from the city to reach jobs in the suburbs during peak periods, while others will take advantage of the frequent East Line to reach DIA all hours of the day.

As a result, the RTD’s regional rail network will function most like the similarly-named system operated by Philadelphia’s Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA): relatively short trains of electric multiple unit (EMU) vehicles – usually two or three per trainset – drawing their power from overhead catenary systems and operating several trips per hour in both directions, a departure from the traditional in-and-out structure of commuter rail operations on the East Coast and around Chicago.

FasTracks’ East Rail Line to DIA and Gold Line – heading west to Wheat Ridge – will both open in their entirety in 2016, along with the first stage of the Northwest Line to Westminster. To enhance the connectivity of the new regional rail lines with the existing light-rail network, FasTracks is currently extending the D Line’s Central Corridor just less than a mile to connect with the East Rail Line at its 38th and Blake station and the G Line’s I-225 corridor another 10.5 miles to reach the new Peoria station, also on the East Rail Line. The links between the two rail transit modes will allow more convenient trips to destinations throughout the region, avoiding circuitous routes through Union Station. Several rail-oriented development projects are in the works at stops along both lines, including one of the nation’s largest affordable housing projects ever at a rail station, supported by the Urban Land Conservancy.

Next to arrive will be the North Metro Line in 2018. Utilizing a former Union Pacific right-of-way, the 18.4-mile route will connect Union Station and communities north of Denver, including Commerce City, Thornton and Northglenn. Among the four FasTracks regional rail corridors, the North Metro Line has the greatest potential to reshape land-use patterns around its stations due to the current, decentralized nature of the suburban areas through which
it will travel. A potential extension of the line could ultimately reach as far north as Lafayette. In 2009, lower-than-expected returns on the sales tax that delivers FasTracks revenues threatened to postpone the project. However, an additional public-private partnership agreement allowed construction to begin on the corridor earlier this year.

“My thought then was, ‘This is a huge deal,’” said RTD General Manager Phil Washington. “But I was actually thinking about how we were going to do it. We opened our agency kimono [a Japanese expression for no secrets – ed]. We said, ‘This is what we need to build. Help us build it.’”

The most challenging aspect of the FasTracks effort is the regional rail line with the largest overall mobility impact: full realization of the 41-mile Northwest Rail Line to Boulder and Longmont. With populations of 97,000 and 86,000, respectively – and the location of the University of Colorado in Boulder – the line would link some of Colorado’s largest communities, including the under-construction portion to Westminster and its more than 106,000 residents. Unlike the East, Gold and North Metro corridors – which had access to former freight rail rights-of-way, alignments next to active rail lines or publicly-owned highway routes – the Northwest line requires direct use of BNSF’s existing main line, itself currently at capacity with freight traffic. New
double and triple track segments would be needed to introduce passenger rail trips on the route, along with upgraded signaling and communications infrastructure – a significant capital expense. Following a recent study, jurisdictions along the corridor approved a plan to implement the BRT line on U.S. 36 between Boulder and Union Station supported by FasTracks investment and study additional BRT routes within the corridor. Although the communities along the Northwest line are accepting of BRT options in the short-term, local leaders and citizens alike still strive for frequent, reliable rail service between Longmont, Boulder and Denver.

More than two-thirds of those polled agreed with the following statement in a poll conducted of Boulder County voters by Talmey-Drake Research and Strategy Inc., in 2012:

“Some say that we should not be building more bus rapid transit lanes if it means delaying the time commuter rail service will be completed. After all, commuter rail service is what we originally voted for back in 2004. It will attract riders who will not ride a bus, it will be more comfortable and is necessary for a world-class region. So the sooner we can complete the commuter rail service between Westminster and Louisville, Boulder and Longmont, the better.”

Weighing Risk Against Resiliency

The ambitiousness of the Denver region’s visions for its rail transit network is hard to overstate. Few metropolitan areas in North America will have delivered as much new passenger rail infrastructure over the past half century in so short a timeframe. Needless to say, it required a citizenry and local leaders not shy of risk. That risk was undertaken with the goal of achieving a region that viewed itself as a global trendsetter.

“When you look around [the world], you see what cities took the risk, because those are your great cities,” says the RTD’s Washington. “Sometimes, you have to take a risk.”

At the same time, the willingness to embrace risk requires a collective fortitude to embrace challenges encountered along the way, such as the waxing and waning of funding streams or unexpected difficulties in the construction process. These are the growing pains of a rapidly-expanding infrastructure network, the kind currently being witnessed by communities on the Northwest corridor. The region’s experience in realizing its mobility goals to date suggests ample stores of resiliency for the path ahead.

“A lot of this is really about good things gone bad gone good,” says Tom Clark, CEO of the Metro Denver Economic Group, a group of regional business leaders whose strong support of FasTracks helped make the effort successful with voters. “It’s about the resiliency of the community.”