

# FasTracks Project Report

## Introduction

This report provides information to assist City Council in understanding the current status of the Regional Transportation District's (RTD) FasTracks program and the potential effects to the City of Longmont. While this paper will provide the most up-to-date information at the time, the information and status change on a weekly basis. With the frequency of new information, RTD representatives will be available at the retreat for a presentation and a question/answer session. The retreat discussion will cover:

- 1) Basic background information on FasTracks
- 2) Longmont's role in 2009 regarding FasTracks (Key dates/events for Longmont to provide comments before recommendations are made to the RTD Board)
- 3) Update on current activities within RTD by agency representatives and staff

## General Background

### Timeline - 2004

In November 2004, 54 percent of the voters in Longmont approved the FasTracks initiative. Overall, voters in the district approved the FasTracks measure by a 58 percent margin. In the months prior to the November election, City officials worked with RTD to include Longmont in the commuter rail corridor originally planned as a Denver-to-Boulder rail connection. RTD planned for a station site in Longmont referred to as the Twin Peaks Mall station. The projected ridership on the rail portion for what was originally referred to as the US-36 Corridor was 8,000 to 10,000 riders per day, which was considered a reasonable number of riders for this type of transit system.

### Timeline - 2005

In 2005, RTD worked with City staff and elected officials to complete the Longmont Diagonal Rail Feasibility Study. This study was developed to "analyze candidate stations and their Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) potential" for rail from Boulder to Longmont. The feasibility study identified two stations in Longmont capable of supporting Transit Oriented Development - the Flour Mill and Sugar Factory sites. The vision for the Flour Mill station was a walk-up, bus transfer facility with limited parking while the Sugar Factory was seen as the end-of-line, park-n-Ride component with more shopping opportunities on the eastern edge of the City.

### Timeline - 2006

The Longmont Diagonal Rail Project Environmental Evaluation (EE) started in 2006. The EE is a required federal finding on the environmental impact to the area affected by the planned rail line. In this study, RTD determined that the Flour Mill was the most cost-effective station for Longmont, while the Sugar Factory was dropped from the evaluation due to costs associated with building a causeway over identified wetlands between Martin Street and Sugarmill Road. As part of this study, RTD presented

evaluations of the double- and single-track options, determining that double-tracking should be “seriously” considered for service reliability, flexibility and safety.

#### Timeline - 2007

In 2007, the primary effort was focused on development near the Flour Mill station site at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Terry Street. A preliminary evaluation and a concept plan for the Flour Mill site were developed, including a proposed bicycle/pedestrian spine along Coffman Street using a grade-separated bridge over the railroad connecting the St. Vrain Greenway with the planned station site and downtown. Additionally, long-term parking was moved farther away from the station to allow the prime space adjacent to the station to be developed with a mix of land uses. Also in 2007, RTD made the cost-savings decision to single-track the portion of commuter rail from Boulder to Longmont.

#### Timeline - 2008

In the early part of 2008, the City began the process of hiring a consultant to move from the concept level to the actual area planning associated with the Flour Mill station for FasTracks. By summer, the consultant interviews had been scheduled with a short list of firms when news from RTD halted the process. Due to an unprecedented spike in construction costs combined with lower than projected tax revenue collections, RTD was considering a number of options to address the shortfall in revenues necessary to build out the complete FasTracks system approved by voters in 2004. The options presented by RTD staff included:

- building the original system in 26 years, rather than the planned nine-year time frame;
- dividing the projected money expected by 2017 as a portion to each corridor (the Longmont segment of FasTracks was originally projected to be completed in late 2014 or early 2015 at the time FasTracks was approved by voters);
- devoting the projected money expected by 2017 to just one of the corridors; and,
- developing other revenue sources to build out the system as originally planned.

RTD held public outreach meetings during the fall. The option with overwhelming support was to develop other revenue sources and complete the entire system as planned within the original 2017 timeframe. The decision of the RTD Board of Directors on how to proceed in the current economic conditions is expected in March of 2009.

The most recent discussions regionally, primarily within the Metro Mayors Caucus, have been based on:

- “Fair share” for the corridors and what that concept would be based on: the percentage of the original costs approved by voters in 2004, cost per passenger, cost per mile, passenger mile, etc.; and
- Modeling issues associated with railroad negotiations, including the potential loss of midday service for daily maintenance operations and lower allowed speed for commuter rail in the existing corridor. Also, recent changes in long-range land use assumptions for the City of Boulder, providing lower job growth versus higher levels of housing development, have affected the ridership numbers in the model. A meeting with RTD and the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)

modeling staff is planned for mid-January to answer questions regarding the modeling issue with respect to Longmont and the Northwest Rail Corridor.

### **Next Steps for Longmont**

The City of Longmont must be closely involved in the RTD decision-making process as its decision has a significant impact on the future of local land use and transportation issues. Locally, the City will stay ahead of the issues concerning the station area planning process, including monitoring and involvement in the ongoing environmental evaluation, which should be completed regardless of the future of FasTracks. The key local issues in the environmental work will be:

- inclusion of the double-track facility, specifically between Longmont and Boulder
- a second potential “kiss-n-Ride” station near the Twin Peaks Mall redevelopment area
- the potential headways or frequency of service for a future Longmont rail system the speed at which a future rail system would operate within this rail corridor
- Quiet Zones as a noise mitigation measure in the corridor as most of the noise associated with additional train traffic will be from sounding the horn at street crossings
- the impact of fencing along the NW rail corridor

The City will proceed with the station area plan for the Flour Mill site after RTD announces its decision regarding the option it plans to select for constructing the FasTracks system. However, initial work is already complete with regards to drainage issues, specifically an analysis of the St. Vrain flood plain area. Preliminary results will include an alternatives analysis and will be presented to the Council in early 2009. Once a decision is made at RTD and future direction is better understood, City staff will come back to the City Council for recommendations on how or whether to proceed with the station area planning process.

At a regional level, the City must continue to be active in:

- direct testimony at the RTD Board meetings when warranted
- the US-36/NWR coalition, including the 36 Commuting Solutions and their associated Mayors and Commissioners Coalition
- Metro Mayors Coalition (MMC) task force, which is actively involved in providing direction to the RTD Board regarding the future of FasTracks
- Transit Alliance ACTION 2009 Committee
- North Metro Coalition as a possible future connection from Longmont to the North Metro commuter rail in Thornton. The North I-25 EIS rail option supports FasTracks connections to both NWR and North Metro rail components
- Regular ongoing discussions with RTD board members and staff

## **Update from RTD Chairman and Staff**

Chairman Lee Kemp and Northwest Rail Corridor Project Manager Chris Quinn will present updated information regarding the upcoming board decisions in March. Dialogue between City Council members and RTD representatives is scheduled at the end of the presentation.

Appropriate questions for Chairman Kemp and Mr. Quinn are:

- What is the current timing of the Environmental Evaluation (EE) for the NW Rail Corridor (as this work item is included in all the FasTracks options currently on the table)? How long is the EE applicable?
- How can the City of Longmont best be involved in the process leading up to the Board of Directors decision on options in March?
- Would it help to have City Council testimony at future RTD Board meetings?
- Are there any ways to influence BNSF regarding operating hours and speeds in the NW rail corridor?
- When will the Board receive updated cost and revenue estimates and ridership projections?
- Are other corridors affected by the issues with the railroad companies to the same extent as the NW rail corridor?
- Is there flexibility in assumptions about ridership projections on opening day in 2015 versus 20 years later, in 2035? Should the current negotiated hours of operation and allowed speed by the BNSF change in the model?

## **Attachments**

- 1) FasTracks map
- 2) Concept Plan for the DOT
- 3) Schedule/timeline of upcoming meetings regarding FasTracks future
- 4) Cost data for FasTracks and Northwest Rail Corridor