



The Mobility Plan for Denver

DRCOG's 2025 transportation plan would increase the amount of time the average metro-area commuter wastes in traffic from 50 hours a year in 2001 to 87 hours by 2025. Even with FasTracks, the time wasted per commuter would increase to 83 hours. As an alternative, the Center for the American Dream proposes a Mobility Plan for Denver that would reduce annual delay to less than 45 hours per commuter. Without increasing taxes, the plan would also reduce air pollution, increase transportation safety, and provide greater mobility for low-income and transit-dependent people.

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In 2001, Denver, the nation's twentieth-largest urban area, had by most measures the nation's fourth or fifth worst congestion. The Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) predicts that, under its 2025 regional transportation plan, the amount of time the average Denver resident wastes sitting in traffic will increase by 73 percent by 2025. RTD's plan to build FasTracks will still allow it to increase by 65 percent.

Put another way, the average Denver commuter wasted about 50 hours a year sitting in traffic in 2001. DRCOG's 2025 plan would increase this to 87 hours, while the addition of FasTracks would increase it to 83 hours. Neither DRCOG nor RTD have tried to develop a plan that would maintain congestion at or reduce it from current levels. Indeed, the increased congestion contemplated by those plans might lead one to call them "immobility plans."

FasTracks is expected to take just 1.4 percent of rush-hour traffic off the road. That might be satisfactory if FasTracks cost 2 or 3 percent of the region's transportation budget, but in fact it will cost 40 percent of the funds DRCOG says will be available to spend on transit and highway improvements in the next 22 years.

The Independence Institute proposes an alternate Mobility Plan for Denver, one that will actually reduce per-capita congestion even as it provides better transit service than FasTracks. Moreover, this Mobility Plan for Denver can be implemented without increasing taxes. The plan includes nine components:

1. Require that all transportation investments aimed at reducing congestion meet a cost effectiveness test;
2. Don't build FasTracks rail lines unless they pass the cost-effectiveness measure;
3. Coordinate traffic signals and make other operational improvements to highways throughout the

metropolitan area;

4. Build a network of express toll lanes throughout the region;
5. Contract out the 50 percent of transit services that RTD currently operates;
6. Offer bus-rapid transit along all FasTracks corridors using, whenever possible, express toll lanes;
7. Allow private transit operators to provide an expanded range of transit services throughout the metropolitan area;
8. Provide safe and cost-effective bicycle and pedestrian improvements that don't unnecessarily hinder auto travel; and
9. Help low-income families find the mobility they need to get out of poverty.

1. Cost Effectiveness: DRCOG should use its transportation models to estimate the number of hours of people's time that would be saved by every proposed transportation improvement. Investments should be ranked by their *cost to the taxpayer per hour saved* and projects with the lowest cost should be given the highest priority, whether they are roads, rail transit, bus transit, or whatever. This doesn't mean safety, clean air, or the mobility of transit-dependent people should be sacrificed, but these goals are often compatible with a goal of cost-effective congestion relief.

2. Don't Build FasTracks: Proposed FasTracks rail lines have some of the highest costs-per-hour saved. While there may be a rail line that is cost effective, building all the FasTracks rail lines would be a huge waste of money. Not building the lines would free up some \$900 million federal dollars that can be used to help finance the other portions of this plan.

3. Coordinate Traffic Signals: DRCOG has found that spending a few million dollars coordinating traffic

signals can do more to reduce congestion than any of the \$400-million-plus FasTracks rail lines, and more to reduce air pollution than all of the FasTracks rail lines put together. Yet hundreds of traffic signals remain uncoordinated and funds are not available to coordinate them all. The Mobility Plan proposes to use \$50 million of flexible federal funds that would otherwise go to FasTracks to coordinate the remaining uncoordinated signals. Other operational actions such as freeway ramp metering and electronic signs warning motorists of congestion ahead may also be cost effective.

4. Express Toll Lanes: The most important step towards reducing the region's congestion will be construction of a region-wide network of express toll lanes adjacent to the region's freeways. By varying tolls with the amount of congestion, these lanes will never be congested. CDOT says that the cost of adding such lanes to I-25 north, I-70 east, I-225, I-270, US 36, and C-470 could be completely covered by the toll revenues. The Mobility Plan also calls for express toll lanes on US 6, I-70 west, and I-76, with tolls supplemented as needed by Denver's share of federal gas tax revenues. This network will take at least six times as many vehicles off existing highway lanes as FasTracks, thus relieving congestion for everyone even as they offer people a congestion-free alternative for getting around the region.

5. Contract Out Transit: RTD contracts out half its bus operations to private operators, and those private operators spend half as much per mile or hour of bus operations as RTD spends on the buses it runs itself. Contracting out all of the buses would save at least \$50 million per year that could be spent providing rapid bus transit and making other transit improvements.

6. Rapid Bus Transit: Bus-rapid transit consists of operating buses on frequencies and speeds that are similar to rail transit. RTD says that bus-rapid transit can operate faster and more frequently yet cost less to build and less to operate per rider than any of the FasTracks rail lines. Major investment studies done for the various FasTracks rail lines all concluded that bus-rapid transit was more cost effective at reducing congestion than rail transit. RTD should use the savings from contracting out transit, plus federal funds that FasTracks would dedicate to bus improvements, to starting and operating bus-rapid transit in all FasTracks corridors.

7. Private Transit: Private transit using smaller buses and more flexible service can supplement bus-rapid transit and improve service for both transit-dependent people and people seeking alternatives to driving. More

than two-dozen companies already provide such private transit service to Denver International Airport but are not allowed to serve other destinations. The Public Utilities Commission recently authorized a private transit service between Aurora and Denver that offers rides for \$1. Such private transit services should be expanded throughout the region.

8. Bicycle & Pedestrian Improvements: According to the 2000 census, 2.7 percent of Denver-area commuters walk or bicycle to work. While this seems small, the cost of providing facilities that will attract people to walk or bicycle is far less than the cost of rail transit. Unfortunately, many supposedly pedestrian-friendly actions actually create more dangerous conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. Converting one-way streets to two-way increases the dangers to pedestrians. Narrowing of streets and various other forms of so-called traffic calming makes streets more dangerous for cyclists. Cities should instead promote walking and cycling in ways that don't create impediments to driving.

9. Help Low-Income Families: More than 60,000 households in the Denver-Boulder urban areas have no cars, in most cases due to low incomes. Researchers have found that owning a motor vehicle is an important step toward getting out of poverty. The Mobility Plan proposes to assist low-income families acquire their first automobiles. It also proposes to give transit vouchers to transit-dependent people, thus supporting the people who need transit rather than transit bureaucracies.

Costs of the Mobility Plan: The Mobility Plan for Denver will cost about the same as FasTracks. But 89 percent of FasTracks' costs would be paid by local taxpayers, while nearly all of the costs of the Mobility Plan will be paid out of user fees. Yet the Mobility Plan will provide far more congestion relief than FasTracks.

Benefits of the Mobility Plan: The Independence Institute estimates that the Mobility Plan will significantly reduce congestion on both freeways and other major roads. Express toll ways will attract six times as many people off of existing freeways as FasTracks. The Institute estimates that, by 2025, the Mobility Plan will reduce the amount of time the average resident wastes in traffic by 12 percent to less than 45 hours per year. The plan will also reduce air pollution, increase transportation safety, and provide greater mobility for low-income and transit-dependent people.

For more information, see the complete *Mobility Plan for Denver*, available on line at i2i.org/articles/8-2004.pdf.