

# THE DENVER POST

## How the Denver-to-DIA train, opening Friday, will change the metro area forever

John Aguilar

April 16, 2016

Twenty-three miles. Thirty-seven minutes. Nine dollars.

That's the distance, the duration and the price of a one-way trip between Union Station and Denver International Airport on the A-Line, which opens Friday.

The Regional Transportation District's train to the airport is a major new option for thousands of daily travelers, who until now had to rely on taxis, ride-hailing services, buses and their own vehicles to get to DIA.

The \$1.2 billion project, the first commuter rail line in Colorado, is the culmination of a plan hatched approximately three decades ago, when the idea arose of moving Denver's airport from its old Stapleton location to a new site on the outskirts of the city.

It took 15 years for voters to give their blessing to the A-Line with a yes vote on the 2004 FasTracks initiative, which promised 122 miles of new rail and 18 miles of bus rapid transit throughout the metro area.

Civic and business leaders characterize a train to DIA as a game-changer for the city and state, launching the metro area into a whole new tier on the international stage.

"If you're going to have a world-class city, you have to have a rail line from your airport to your city," said Andrew Goetz, a professor of geography at the University of Denver who specializes in transportation and transit systems. "It's kind of an expectation people have now: Is there a rail connection?"

Denver joins fewer than 20 cities in the United States — among them Seattle, Salt Lake City and Minneapolis — with a train to the airport. But Denver's line has advantages over most of the others, Goetz said. The high-speed electrified commuter rail (the A-Line can reach a top speed of 79 mph), has only six stops between Union Station and DIA to slow it down, and it pulls right up to the airport without the need for a people-mover, shuttle bus or lengthy hike to get from baggage claim or check-in to the train platform.

In fact, DIA is working toward putting in place a bag drop and providing kiosks to print out boarding passes at the platform, making it possible for travelers to head up the escalator and jump right into the security line.

"Denver is going to have one of the better ones in the U.S.," Goetz said.

Kim Day, DIA's chief executive officer, said the new train line places the airport shoulder to shoulder with some of the premier airports in the world.

"The addition of the commuter rail will no doubt elevate our status among the global cities that offer this type of connectivity to their airports," Day said. "This means that we are no longer competing with Dallas and Chicago, but we are now competing with Zurich and Paris and other international airports."

Michael Gurley, who with his wife was waiting at Union Station earlier this month for a light-rail train to take them to their Centennial home, said he is eager for the A-Line to open.

He recently spent \$79 on a cab to get to the airport for a flight to Las Vegas. The \$9 train fare, he said, would leave a lot more money in his pocket once he got to Sin City.

"That's \$70 more beer I can drink," Gurley said.

### **Flat-rate fare to airport**

RTD general manager Dave Genova said it was important to the agency to set a single fare for a trip to the airport no matter where in the RTD system commuters begin their journey. (Students, riders 65 and older, passengers on Medicare, active military and disabled passengers can qualify for half-price fare.)

Passengers need only purchase a \$9 day pass at the start of their journey — whether that's at the Golden Station on the W-Line or the Lincoln station on the E-Line — and they can transfer for free at Union Station to the A-Line to DIA. The same will hold true for passengers traveling the G-Line, the B-Line and the R-Line, when those services open this year.

"The day pass was a very intentional part of the fare structure to provide more options to the traveler," Genova said. "From every corner of the region, people will be able to take public transit to get to downtown and on to the airport."

That means no more trips on the AF bus for Morrison resident Scott Fisher, who was waiting on a recent weekday for a bus at Union Station on the soon-to-be-decommissioned route on his way to catching a flight to Billings, Mont. His future route to DIA most likely will consist of a ride on the W-Line from Golden to Union Station, where he'll transfer to the A train.

"I'd almost always prefer the train to the bus," Fisher said.

That's a sentiment Goetz, the DU professor, attributes to an ethereal concept he calls "rail mystique."

"People feel more comfortable riding a train than riding a bus," he said.

RTD projects 27,000 passenger trips per day on the A-Line at the start of service, with that number growing to 48,000 per day by 2030. Many of those passengers will not only be from out of state but from overseas, where train travel and rail connections are far more common.

Richard Scharf, president and CEO of Visit Denver, said there's more than merely a coolness factor to having train service to the airport. The second-most-frequent complaint he gets from tourism companies and conventioners is the sizable distance between DIA and downtown Denver.

In the eyes of many travelers, Scharf said, nothing beats rail for reliability, especially when set against the snarled traffic and foul weather that bedevils roadways.

The A-Line, with service every 15 minutes between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. and every 30 minutes at other times, should go a long way toward allaying those concerns.

"Meeting planners are looking for scenarios that are both cost-effective and convenient," Scharf said. "We see the train as part of the steak, not the sizzle. You got to have it."

### **Potential financial issues**

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, argues the opposite. The train is far too expensive for what it delivers, he said, and it serves a relatively small segment of the traveling public. RTD should have stuck with its bus service to the airport and used the money it would have saved to alleviate congestion on Interstate 70 and Peña Boulevard, he said.

"Rails are great for moving large amounts of freight from point A to point B, but they are terribly inefficient for moving passengers except in extremely high-density places such as Tokyo," O'Toole wrote in an e-mail. "Tourists do want to have easily understandable transport systems, but that can be achieved with distinctive buses (think Boulder's Hop, Skip, and Jump), Uber and things like that."

O'Toole said the much-touted pairing of RTD with design-build-finance consortium Denver Transit Partners to construct the A-Line as a public-private partnership isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Because the operating and maintenance agreement between RTD and DTP runs for the next 28 years, he said, the private concessionaire will be leaving the scene right as the A-Line begins showing its age.

"Rail lines have an expected lifespan of 30 years. So the private partner only has to run it until it starts to fall apart, then turns it over to the public to spend another billion restoring it," he said.

"And how many are going to be riding it 15 years from now when self-driving taxis can take people from door to door for about the same or lower cost than the train?"

RTD spokeswoman Tara Bettale said the partnership with DTP, which doesn't earn its monthly fee unless it keeps the A-Line trains running smoothly, has allowed RTD to redirect funds to other transit corridors it otherwise could not have funded at this time. That includes the G-Line to Arvada and Wheat Ridge, the B-Line to Westminster and the R-Line through Aurora — all set to open this year.

"Thank goodness for the P3 (public-private partnership)," Bettale said. "We will now have three corridors that were underserved."

She also noted that DTP's work on the A-Line has to be good for 60 years per the agreement.

What's not yet known is what impact the train will have on the businesses that have relied on the steady vehicle traffic to DIA for the past 20 years. Taxi companies, long-term parking lots, rental car companies and ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft may need to adapt and adjust to a world where customers have a new way of getting to the airport.

Most of the affected companies reached by The Denver Post said they would do their best to coexist with the new line. Carl Allen, regional vice president for Denver Yellow Cab and Denver SuperShuttle parent company Transdev On Demand, said his main competition has always been people driving their own vehicles.

"Anything that provides an alternative to driving a car creates more opportunities for us," he said.

Dennis Safford, corporate director of communications for Propark America, the national parking management company that oversees Canopy Airport Parking's operations near DIA, touted the facility as a more cost-effective option than the train much of the time.

A Lyft spokeswoman said her company is talking with transit agencies across the country to figure out how Lyft can be a "last mile" solution — that is, providing the link between people's homes to the nearest transit stop.

RTD has built more than 4,300 parking spaces at the six stations between Union Station and the airport, with room to grow to nearly 8,000 by 2030.

Uber and the American Car Rental Association declined to comment for this story.

### **Other services**

Tom Clark, CEO of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp., projected that business at airport parking lots will go "flat for a while," and taxi companies will have to come to terms with the fact that "the days of the very high price of getting to and from the airport are over."

But those services, he said, won't die. In other cities with rail links to the airport, taxis still pick up fares, satellite parking lots still fill up and rental car companies still have a presence.

For some people, a train ride will simply not be the best fit for their travel plans, whether that's a family from Texas on their way to a ski vacation in the mountains or a college student headed back to classes in Greeley.

For families beginning their journey at a light-rail station in the suburbs, one of the biggest considerations is luggage. RTD's light-rail trains weren't built to accommodate big pieces of luggage, and passengers have to step up and down to get on and off the train — not a happy prospect when lugging heavy bags and juggling young children.

Couple that with the fact that RTD's light-rail lines arrive at the extreme west end of Union Station, necessitating a three-block walk to get to the A-Line platform. Some families may opt to drive to DIA or hire a cab.

Goetz said although the distance between the light rail and A-Line platforms at Union Station is not "the most desirable situation" when it comes to changing trains, it's hard to know if it will be a deal-breaker. RTD provides an underground passage to protect its customers from the elements, and escalators and elevators make the journey to the subterranean concourse easy. But anything that interferes with the seamlessness of airport travel can be a problem.

"Will it dissuade people from taking the train? I don't know," Goetz said.

In the end, the benefits of the train to DIA far outweigh any detractors, according to Clark.

"All of these train lines are huge economic generators for these communities," he said. "It's what the next generation of travelers will demand."

According to a 2013 study done by the U.S. Travel Association, hotels performed on average 10.9 percent better over a six-year period beginning in 2006 in terms of both average daily rate charged for rooms and revenue earned per room in cities with a rail link to the airport than in cities without one.

The association's senior director of domestic policy, Erik Hansen, said this performance dynamic was consistent across a variety of economic conditions — "pre-recession, during the recession and post-recession."

The benefits of the A-Line to the metro area may not be apparent at the outset, Hansen said, but those with patience will appreciate the results.

"It's not what you see in the first couple months of usage; it's what you see over the next 10 to 15 years," he said. "Denver is getting ahead of the curve."