

Sharf: Front Range commuter rail—forward, into the 19th Century!

Joshua Sharf

June 4, 2021

I'll confess right up front to understanding the appeal of trains to the commuter. In the late 90s, I had a contract with a tech startup in San Francisco, and occasionally traveled out there for work. I was cheap, so instead of staying downtown, I took the CalTrain from Palo Alto. Including the walk, it was about 90 minutes each way, and I could read, nap, work, or just take in the view without fighting traffic.

But it only worked because I could walk to each station without transfers, didn't need to run many errands, and didn't need late-night rides. (Late at night after the trains stopped running, I would hitch a ride with a co-worker who lived down that way. In a car. On the 101.)

I also couldn't possibly have cared less about making like a tiny bit easier for someone on the highway, which was a rush-hour nightmare, without or without my fellow train passengers and me.

Interstate 25 around Denver isn't quite that bad yet, but it feels that way sometimes, especially south of Denver, where the interminable construction is now slated to finish right around the time traffic catches up with the extra lane.

Enter **Senate Bill 21-238** and the proposed Front Range Passenger Rail service. Designed initially to use Union Pacific or BNSF tracks, the service would run from Pueblo to Denver, and from Denver to Ft. Collins, most of the length of the Front Range. At the bargain price of only \$2.8 billion, we can get all of 2-6 round trips per day up and down the Front Range from Ft. Collins to Denver. There is still no mention of what the fare would be.

As is often the case with rail, the benefits are couched in glowing terms, often designed to appeal to drivers. Eventually, the trains will **run on their own tracks**, helping to build a "culture of passenger rail," offer more daily runs, and we will see **over 2.2 million annual passengers!**

These benefits fall apart under closer examination. First, it appeals to the wrong people. If the pitch for commuter rail is that it'll reduce traffic on the highways and make people's commutes smoother, it's selling everyone on the idea that someone else will actually take the train. But they won't, not even according to the panel's own numbers.

Two and a quarter million passengers per year may sound like a lot, but it's really only about 6,000 passengers per day. According to CDOT's own traffic counts, **hundreds of thousands of cars** use the portion of I-25 north of Denver every day, today, years before the train is projected to reach this ridership.

And as **Randal O'Toole** of the Cato Institute has shown repeatedly, and as RTD has helpfully corroborated, ridership projections are almost invariably too optimistic, and almost invariably reduce highway usage by only a tiny fraction, maybe 1% of cars. People often like the *idea* of trains better than the *reality* of trains, especially when the train has to stand and give right-of-way to the freight lines who own the tracks, and when they still need to transfer to a bus to get where they're going.

A better idea is to do what can be done to promote self-driving cars, in particular clarify where the liability lies for accidents – the driver, the car manufacturer, the software company, or somewhere else? What that law should look like is beyond the scope of this article, but more than unfairness or even inefficiency, business abhors uncertainty.

While self-driving cars scare some people, the fact is, you've likely already shared the highway with self-driving trucks. You haven't noticed, because they still have drivers, but **even that is set to change**. Highways – which the Front Range Commuter Rail is supposed to compete with – are the natural first step for large-scale self-driving cars. There are fewer choices to make, and for the most part you're just driving straight until you get to your exit. Surface streets, **with many more decisions and turns**, can wait until later.

If the legislature wants to *really* be progressive, they'll stop trying to sell 19th Century ideas, and instead enable a 21st Century lifestyle. One where jobs are following people out to the suburbs. One where more people work at home, where they don't follow fixed commuting patterns, and where they often have errands to run before or after work.