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Denver Voters Gallop To Smart Growth

\$4.7 billion transit system to be West's best

By **Keith Schneider**
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DENVER — The bright white rail cars of Denver's Southwest Line, which whisk more than 30,000 passengers a day from suburban Littleton to downtown, have become the signature symbols of a metropolitan region determined to grow in a more sensible way. Since July 2000, when service began on the 14-mile trip, riders have flocked to the line in numbers that vastly exceed original expectations. The popularity of riding a train to work put to shame the screechy warnings of anti-tax opponents who said light rail was a liberal, big government boondoggle that was too expensive, needlessly drained money from highway construction, and wouldn't lure suburbanites out of their SUVs.

Wrong. Denver residents love light rail. And in a metropolitan region expected to add one million more people within 20 years, they want more of it. Much more.

Last November, in an unmistakable vote of confidence for public transit, Denver-area residents agreed to a small increase in a regional sales tax to pay for the largest mass transit construction program since the Metro subway system was built in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s and early 1990s. Denver voters, by a nearly two-to-one margin, decided to make the \$4.7 billion investment because they are convinced that a fast and convenient public transit system pays big economic, environmental, and quality of life dividends.

Instead of building highways that spread development ever farther from the central city, the Denver region decided to strengthen its urban core and focus growth along miles of new light rail, commuter rail, and rapid bus lines. Rail transit is less costly to maintain, less polluting, far more durable than concrete, and saves energy. Public transit also offers developers dozens of stations around which to build the sought-after new neighborhoods that are proving to be the choicest, most affordable and accessible places to live in Denver.

Best in the West

In engineering terms, everything about Denver's new FasTracks project is unique. By increasing sales taxes 4 cents on a \$10 purchase, Denver will have enough cash to construct the most complete public transit system of any metropolitan region in the West. Over the next 12 years, the region's transit agency will build 119 more miles of light and heavy commuter rail lines, 18 miles of rapid bus transit lines, and 57 new transit stations.

When it's finished, the system will connect the full expanse of the Denver region in a web of new rail lines and bus routes. It will reach from city neighborhoods to suburban downtowns to fast-growing exurbs. The interconnected design means that most residents and important destinations will be a short ride or walk from a bus stop or a rail station.

Planners predict that at least a quarter of the Denver area's commuters will get to work on trains and buses. That's an astonishing figure in a region where not terribly long ago people joked that they'd rather die than have the car keys pried from their cold, hard fists.

Denver, in effect, is relying on the transit system as the foundation of a new development strategy that focuses on building from within instead of sprawling ever farther out. Certainly, that is a decision that marks the Denver ballot initiative as one of the singular political achievements of the American Smart Growth movement. The vote also merits



Gregg Gargan

With two-to-one backing from the region's voters, Denver is adding new equipment and 119 miles of new light and commuter rail lines over the next 12 years.

much more attention nationally as one of the most significant outcomes of the 2004 election, and not just because of what happened, but also how it happened.

Unconventional Wisdom

It's almost an article of faith now that Democrats see government as a force for social good and a repository of the sort of useful public spending that light rail represents. On the other hand, we are told that Republicans have little use for meddling government, and are intent on starving the beast by electing ever more conservative anti-government, anti-tax ideologues.

The Denver transit vote shoots big holes in the conventional wisdom. All four Denver-area counties that supported President Bush also voted by comparable margins to support the sales tax increase for the new transit system. But of the three counties that supported Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, just two voted in favor of transit.

Exactly why Adams County turned down the transit system is not well understood, according to leaders here. But the explanation for why the four Republican counties went for the trains is readily available. Melanie Worley, a Republican commissioner in Douglas County, said conservative voters are intensely interested in the quality of their lives and the condition of their communities. Those who make their homes on the Front Range understand that there is neither the money nor the will to add six lanes of concrete in each direction to the region's highways in order to ease congestion now, and avoid gridlock later on this century.

The transit tax increase was seen as a small price to pay for a new way of getting around that was affordable, clean, safe, convenient, and which families said they would use.

"People understood what they were getting for their money," said Ms. Worley. "They felt comfortable supporting a new tool that they believed would benefit them." In other words, voters understood the essence of Smart Growth.

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