

6/16/2005

# In Denver's Transit Breakthrough, A Lesson For Detroit

*FasTracks is foundation of new growth strategy*

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Great Lakes Bulletin News Service

**DENVER** — On a sparkling snow peak morning, Joe Blake's window at the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce frames the fastest growing and most economically dynamic metropolitan region in the Rocky Mountain West. New pinnacles of gleaming glass reach for a brilliant blue sky. In the distance, as the land climbs toward the towering mountains, suburban neighborhoods fill in Mr. Blake's view. Everywhere in this part of Colorado, whether it's toney Boulder north of Denver, or Douglas County to the south, sidewalks teem with people hustling in and out of lofts and offices, restaurants, galleries, and stores of every sort.

Mr. Blake, the chamber's genial president and chief executive officer, a close ally to the governor and a conservative Republican, is a big dog in the economic and political give and take that shaped Denver over the last decade. The seven-county region, he explains, likely will grow to 3.5 million people in the next 20 years, one million more than today.

For a visitor intimately familiar with Detroit and its suburbs, the slowest **growing, most racially and economically segregated**, yet also among the most congested and sprawling metropolitan regions in the nation, the **contrast is striking**. While too many of Michigan's leaders assert they need billions for new highways, Denver's are ten years into building what Mr. Blake called "a city of the future" — one that follows the routes of a new public transit network.

And while elected leaders in southeast Michigan, constrained by budget deficits, severe partisanship, and a dearth of innovation, complain about what they can't do instead of working for what they could accomplish, Denver leaders are making their goals a reality. From 1994 to 2001, the Denver region built 16 miles of light rail line. Next year, 19 more new miles of light rail will connect the downtown to its southeastern suburbs. And the good news keeps coming: Last November, by a 58 to 42 percent margin, the region's voters approved a new, **\$4.7 billion sales tax that will vastly expand the system**, adding 119 more miles of light and commuter rail, 18 miles of rapid bus routes, and 57 new stations.

## Lessons in Success

The success of Denver's new growth strategy — investing billions in its modern FasTracks public transit system — is a lesson in governance, economics, social values, and politics that southeast Michigan and most of the state's other metropolitan regions must learn if they are to ever catch up in the global race for competitiveness. It requires a kind of dual regional psychology that understands the urgency of Michigan's economic condition, but uses statesmanship and patience to improve it.

In interviews here, Denver leaders said swift population growth, congested freeways, and out of control sprawl provided the urgency. But translating that urgency into action took 12 years of patient, hard work. Many said a galvanizing event was a 1992 report by the Denver Regional Council of Governments, the region's primary planning agency. The comprehensive study on growth and congestion recommended that the region follow the lead of Portland, Ore., St. Louis, and San Diego and build a mass transit system.



Keith Schneider/MLUI

"What we've built so far already has influenced where businesses locate, where housing is built, where people decide to live and how they get to work," said Joe Blake, the president of the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce.

The technical competency of the Regional Transit District, the public transit agency, also helped. Widely regarded as one of the country's best run and best managed, RTD spent \$100 million of its own money in 1994 to build a 5.3-mile downtown rail line on time and on budget. Six years later, with \$35 million more of its own money and \$132 million in federal funds, RTD extended the line 8.7 miles to suburban Littleton, also on budget and on time. In 2001, the agency added nearly two miles more to link the suburbs to the city's downtown sports stadiums.

With each addition, ridership increased. Tens of thousands of Denver residents happy with RTD's safe, convenient, cost-effective service said they wanted more.

Perhaps most importantly — and this is the lesson southeast Michigan most needs to learn — the region's elected leaders understood that, though every community has self interests, all wanted to ensure their common economic health and quality of life. A rare unity of purpose emerged.

"We had meetings early on while we prepared the campaign for FasTracks in which we agreed not to criticize each other in public, no matter what," said Melanie Worley, a Republican Douglas County Commissioner. "The public, and any opponents, no matter how influential they were, had to see we were truly united for this to succeed."

The final ingredient was persistence. In 1997, when RTD put a small sales tax increase on the ballot to finance construction of six new rail lines — a plan remarkably similar to what voters approved last year — it failed. Lauren Martens, an environmental organizer who helped lead the successful 2004 ballot initiative, said the 1997 transit plan was not as clear about costs and line routes as the 2004 plan. Also, a prominent, libertarian, free-market RTD board member opposed the 1997 proposal, which Mr. Martens said confused voters.

### **The Long March**

But transit boosters refused to give up. In 1998, voters elected new RTD board members who supported light rail and other mass transit improvements. A year later, the business community, led by the Denver chamber, worked with civic groups and several elected leaders to organize and finance a new grassroots regional coalition, the Transit Alliance. They hired Mr. Martens and another environmental organizer, Kelly Nordini.

The alliance recruited mayors and other local elected leaders from more than 30 communities to endorse FasTracks and serve on committees promoting regional transit. The regional planning agency published several new studies that set out a strategic growth plan that made light rail and other public transit projects high public priorities. And the alliance recruited thousands of volunteers, convened hundreds of public meetings, and distributed promotional flyers and fact sheets to metro Denver residents.

In 1999, the strategy began to yield results. Voters approved two ballot measures raising \$1.7 billion to expand two Interstate highways and build 19 miles of new light rail lines and 13 new stations in the southeastern suburbs. Much of that project will be finished next year. Then, in 2000, the expanded light rail line to Littleton opened to public acclaim and the regional transit agency refined its FasTracks plan.

In 2003 and 2004, Transit Alliance campaigned to put FasTracks on the November ballot. The Denver chamber contributed \$750,000 to the \$3.5 million media and get-out-the-vote campaign, which was managed by CRL Associates, a prominent political consultant in Denver. The basic message: For just four pennies on a \$10 purchase, FasTracks will deliver projects on time that people will use and that will make Denver better.

Last November's successful vote put Denver at the vanguard of a national Smart Growth movement intent on developing new ways to grow that are convenient, less costly, save energy, and improve the quality of life. Denver's Democratic Mayor, John Hickenlooper, who was active in the campaign, summarized those goals in one word: Sustainability.

Noting the FasTracks vote at the city's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Smarter Growth Conference in April, Mr. Hickenlooper said that sustainability "requires us to recognize the interconnectedness between the social, economic, and environmental

impact of our policies and programs, as we seek to ensure that future generations will enjoy a quality of life characterized by environmental beauty, economic opportunity, and resource abundance.”

### **What’s the Difference?**

So, what does Denver have that metropolitan Detroit and much of Michigan lack?

It’s not that regions of the state cannot compete. Michigan is second to none, for instance, in the kind of natural and scenic resources that help make Denver such a choice places to live.

It’s not a lack of intellectual resources. Michigan has great universities that produce the kind of well-educated people necessary for innovation and high quality research.

Nor is it the ability to draw up plans for the future. Many Michigan leaders, like their counterparts in Denver, recognize the opportunities that containing sprawl and investing in much better public transportation offer.

In fact, just two years ago, a 26-member bipartisan commission appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer M. Granholm and the Republican state House and Senate leaders determined that one major step toward maintaining competitiveness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was to build “effective, safe, reliable, and accessible public transit” that would help revive Detroit and its older suburbs. And just two weeks ago, in an acclaimed address on Mackinac Island, former Governor William G. Milliken reminded hundreds of business and political leaders that Detroit *turned down* a \$600 million federal transit grant in the mid-1970s, a decision that accelerated that region’s decline.

“Construction of a truly regional transportation system would have put Detroit and its neighbors light years ahead of where we are today,” said Mr. Milliken.

The big difference between Denver and Detroit, according to Mr. Blake, is that Denver *acted* on its big idea. In an interview, he said business and civic leaders, regardless of political, racial, religious, social, or economic persuasion, put aside differences and embraced a core value: “continuous intense pursuit” of public investments that assure economic competitiveness. And no investment, he said, was more basic or vital than modernizing the region’s transportation system, especially mass transit.

### **Bright Future**

Planners predict that when Denver’s FasTracks public transit system is finished in 2016, it will attract so much new development that half of the region’s new residents — 550,000 people — will live and work within walking distance or a short ride of a transit stop. The rail and rapid bus routes alone will carry a quarter of all rush-hour commuters.

Such confidence simply reflects the fact that FasTracks is far and away the most elaborate regional transit system planned in the United States since Washington, D.C., constructed its metro system in the 1980s and early 1990s.

But, beyond its comprehensive nature, FasTracks represents the full flowering in the politically conservative Rocky Mountain West of a new economic development strategy that ties housing, jobs, recreation, and retail businesses together not by new highways but by steel rails and other public transit. It is a strategy that 24 other American cities have embraced by building new, regional, light and commuter rail lines since the late 1980s, according to the Federal Transit Administration. In every case ridership exceeded initial expectations and regional economies have flourished. Even car-happy Houston is now constructing a 73-mile rail network.

“The decision here by voters to pay a little more to build a regional transit system is going to define what the Denver region will be in this century,” said Mr. Blake. “What we’ve built so far already has influenced where businesses locate, where housing is built, where people decide to live and how they get to work. It’s a very smart decision and people are excited about it. They know it is the right thing to do.”

Meanwhile, back in southeast Michigan, few elected leaders **talk publicly about transit's ability to build a new economy**. Tellingly, two of Michigan's most influential leaders, Republican Oakland County Executive Brooks Patterson and Republican House Speaker Craig DeRoche of Novi, insist that the foundation for economic success in their state — which is among the slowest growing, has the highest unemployment, and drives more talented young people away than almost any other — is more of the same. They've both publicly and prominently said they want more highways and more sprawl.

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