

October 22, 2021

Governor Jared Polis
200 E. Colfax Avenue, Room 136
Denver, CO 80203

Executive Director Shoshana Lew
Colorado Department of Transportation
2829 W. Howard Place
Denver, CO 80204

CEO and General Manager Debra Johnson
Regional Transportation District
1660 Blake Street
Denver, CO 80202

Dear Governor Polis, Executive Director Lew, and General Manager Johnson,

The Denver region and the State of Colorado are facing enormous challenges, and the lack of productive conversations among the state government, RTD, and local municipalities is undermining our ability to tackle them. It's past time for all levels of government to come together to collaboratively address our communities' pressing needs.

The letter sent to RTD from CDOT on October 20, 2021 signals to everyone that communication and collaboration are not occurring between the two agencies and it does little to build faith in good government. We won't solve our transportation problems through letters like this or by operating in isolation. We need to see an unprecedented level of communication and collaboration. We will not have a transportation system that reduces climate and ozone pollution, cuts traffic fatalities, and equitably expands access and opportunity in the region if CDOT and RTD do not come together and lead the effort to solve our transportation problems.

The failure to work together to solve the problems facing our transportation system and to adequately fund the critical transit services we need results in pitting community against community. We need to all be focused on raising significantly more funding for transit.

Whether it's adding back the Flatiron Flyer 4, the Flatiron Flyer 2, and the Longmont Express route in the NW part of the Denver region or restoring and expanding the service that was cut during the pandemic that [disproportionately impacted Black residents, people of color, and low-income residents](#), one thing is clear: we cannot solve our transportation problems if we're fighting each other. We succeed and fail together.



Everyone agrees, we need more people riding buses and trains. Right now, we're fighting over how to divide up a small transit pie. Our main focus should be significantly expanding the pie, above and beyond the one time ARPA funding already earmarked for transit in the Denver metro area, which is only filling budget gaps and still forcing hard decisions about where to prioritize service.

Too often when fighting over limited resources, ridership and equity are presented as competing priorities. We need to stop pitting higher income "choice" riders against low income riders who rely on public transit for most trips, and instead start working to ensure everyone has real access to the opportunities and benefits transit brings.

Increased ridership and equity are intertwined and when equity is a guiding principle, service will go where it's needed most and where it will have the biggest impact. According to a Reimagine RTD analysis, ridership and equity are not an either/or. In fact, prioritizing transit service in areas that serve low-income households, communities of color, and people who don't own cars results in the highest overall ridership levels. That means we need not only more Flatiron Flyer service but also a lot more bus service on streets like Colfax Avenue and Federal Boulevard.

While we need deeper collaboration and a focus on problem-solving for the collective good, there are also some clear issues each agency needs to lead on.

CDOT has to work to significantly expand financial support for transit service in the Denver region. CDOT's letter makes demands without identifying more funding. If certain routes are deemed priorities for our statewide system, the best way to ensure they become a reality is by shifting, re-allocating, or finding additional money for transit. RTD receives 0.33% of their operating budget from the State, while transit agencies in other states receive on average 20-25%. Consistent and reliable operating funding makes a big difference when it comes to planning and expanding new service and we need everyone working to find more.

We are also concerned that CDOT's recent letter to RTD prescribing specific routes in order to get apportioned dollars lacked the kind of technical and transparent analysis including the documentation of the data, evaluation, public engagement, and equity determinations that we are accustomed to seeing when RTD does service changes. The prescribed service additions run counter to RTD's determination that the populations most impacted by service cuts must be prioritized in service restoration efforts, and the Flatiron Flyer 4, the Flatiron Flyer 2, and the Longmont Express routes do not serve a critical number of people in those populations. We recognize a key tension is how RTD money is allocated within their system and local communities are frustrated. However, we reiterate, we think the most effective role for CDOT would be to help expand transit funding overall.

RTD needs to step up and do their part too. The labor shortage is impacting industries across the board and operator retention and recruitment has been a challenge for RTD since before the

COVID-19 pandemic. For too long this has been a major barrier to increasing service and there has to be a solution, especially as the need for increased transit service is so great in our region. We recognize it will be challenging but we must meet the moment. RTD needs to clearly raise up what it needs and ask for help. We need CDOT, local governments, the private sector, and the current operators to answer the call.

RTD should more proactively work with local municipalities too, whether it's around adjusting fares, increasing service, or making it easier for local areas to buy up service. This is an urgent moment that requires all hands on deck. Cities and counties across the region are eager for more transit and some are aggressively pushing for additional funding in their area because they believe they have solutions they can implement right now. We know RTD has dozens of local municipalities and partners calling for more from a limited pie. We know more money and support is critical. We need RTD to invite local communities in to rebuild trust and meet the needs of our region. When RTD does foster more collaboration and stretches the limited dollars we have, we need everyone in the region to have their back, especially with more funding.

Now, more than ever, to power the comeback from the pandemic in Colorado, support essential workers and the most vulnerable members of our community, and reduce the impact our transportation system has on air quality and climate change, we need agencies like CDOT and RTD to be working together. We need CDOT, RTD, and local partners to find long-term solutions that result in a transportation system that equitably achieves the health, safety, environmental, and economic opportunity goals that we have in this region. The stakes are huge. We are all counting on you. We stand ready to support your efforts. Let's get to work.

Sincerely,

Jill Locantore
Executive Director, Denver Streets Partnership

Danny Katz
Executive Director, CoPIRG
Chair, Denver Streets Partnership Steering Committee

Molly McKinley
Policy Director, Denver Streets Partnership

CC:
RTD Board of Directors