For more than 30 years, the residents, stakeholders and elected officials in Denver, Colorado hoped to someday benefit from a faster transit route between the city’s downtown and the metro area’s western periphery. Thanks to planning, hard work and strategic outreach, the Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) shepherded the $707 million West Rail Line project to a successful grand opening on budget and eight months ahead of schedule.

Since its debut in April 2013, the West Rail Line’s popularity has grown, and the 12.1-mile light rail line has become an integral part of the surrounding landscape. With 11 stops, the line travels between Denver Union Station and the Jefferson County Government Center near Colorado’s historic mining town of Golden.

The West Rail Line is part of RTD’s FasTracks program, the largest transit expansion initiative in the United States, one whose hallmarks include regional collaboration among city, county, state and federal agencies and neighborhood associations. It also showcases an innovative public-private funding model that taps into local, state and federal grants as well as loans and private investments.

**Challenges on the Horizon**

Calls for a better transit solution were evident in Denver’s first transit plan, which was published in the early 1970s. RTD completed several studies for options in the West corridor, and in 1988 purchased the Associated Rail line along 13th Avenue for future transit use, a savvy move.
that trimmed construction costs and saved
time on planning and execution farther
down the line.

In 2001, the transit agency launched a
study to consider both the positive and
negative impacts of building a light rail
line between Denver and Golden along
the Associated Railroad and Denver
Interurban Transit lines, which initiated
an environmental impact statement.
RTD wanted to understand the technical,
environmental and community challenges
and opportunities associated with using
light rail to mitigate congestion issues
expected in the corridor over the coming
decades as the population grows.

The challenges would prove to be manifold.
One was determining how best to traverse
a well-established network of residential
neighborhoods—some of them among
the oldest and most diverse in the Denver
area—for more than three miles. Another
was ascertaining how to navigate through
difficult economic times that posed cost
increases and other unexpected dips in
the road. The economic downturn and
home mortgage crisis affected Denver-
area families adversely through layoffs and
plunging home values. Many homeowners
owed more than their homes were worth.
After acquiring the properties, RTD
payments often went directly to lien holders.

RTD also faced hurdles across multiple
jurisdictions as it sought to widen its
transit right of way, including highway
crossings and homes located directly
along the alignment. To complete the
project, the agency had to widen 13th
Avenue, which runs parallel to the rail
line, to accommodate the double-track
light rail system and a 10-foot bike
path. Compounding the transit agency’s
unpredictable hurdles was the fact that
a number of residents had unknowingly
encroached on RTD property through
home expansions and renovations.

Convincing the Public

Public involvement is an important arrow
in RTD’s quiver of community outreach
efforts during any project, and the West
Rail Line offered many opportunities to
generate local support.

“We knew we had our work cut out for
us if we were to convince the public this
was a sound decision and a project that
would benefit the entire metro Denver
region,” said RTD General Manager
and CEO Phil Washington, who was
recently recognized by the American
Public Transportation Association for his
innovative, cost-effective and customer-
focused initiatives to build projects and
improve service to the public. “The West
Rail Line had to succeed or we risked
public backlash over the region’s support
of our efforts to build out an extensive
rail and bus rapid transit system with
local sales-tax dollars.”

Throughout the process, RTD held
more than 150 meetings to keep
the public informed of the rail line’s
development, design, station plans and
other key issues. In addition to public
meetings with residents, stakeholders,
elected officials and local businesses,
RTD’s public outreach efforts included
weekly construction updates, a monthly
e-newsletter, email blasts, surveys, door-
to-door communication, phone calls
and informational pieces published in
community newspapers and other print
and electronic media.

Despite the decade-long project schedule,
RTD was fortunate to have a consistent
voice from start to finish. From 2001
through 2013, Public Information Manager
Brenda Tierney oversaw the external
communication efforts and was responsible
for ensuring ongoing information was
disseminated from the very beginning
planning stages until the grand opening.
Committed to keeping the residents
informed, Brenda said, “We wanted
everyone to know we were going to be
in their communities for the next several
years and were committed to keeping them
informed and making sure they were fully
aware of every step in the process.”

Managing the Volume

While the mortgage and employment crises
were outside RTD’s control, RTD Manager
of Real Property Susan Altes recognized
that the lack of desired cash payments
to homeowners created more angst than
usual during the acquisition process. “The
sheer volume of acquisitions required for
the line’s construction and operation was
remarkable,” said Susan. “We were trying
to purchase land for the West Rail Line at
the same time we were buying property
for other FasTraks’ initiatives, which put
a heavy burden on our division. However,
because of all of the prep work we did
before the project broke ground, we were
ready to work when we received the go-
ahead, and that gave us a positive start.”

Widening the transit right of way on 13th Avenue impacted highway crossings and homes located along the alignment.
RTD also worked closely with the Federal Transit Administration to ensure all of its property acquisitions and homeowner relocations were compliant with state and federal regulations. Because the project’s right of way team planned carefully, a low number of acquisition challenges wound up in the courts. Of RTD’s 193 property acquisitions (with 322 impacts), 36 condemnation petitions were filed, 27 settled ahead of trial, and nine—just five percent of the total acquisitions—required full court proceedings. Altogether, the transit agency handled 204 relocations, including two apartment buildings.

The list of achievements by RTD’s real property team is extensive, and includes cost savings linked to ditch and water rights acquisitions, intergovernmental agreements on land exchanges, ditches, operation, maintenance, common use and occupancy, and the negotiation of federal approval on complex railroad rights of way and industrial and special-purpose property acquisitions.

In addition to preparing standards and procedures granting more than 500 license agreements, the team oversaw complex, multimillion-dollar real estate closings and escrow agreements. In many cases, they assisted engineers in identifying and quantifying value-engineering opportunities, including environmental impacts, and assisted with utility relocation agreements. And the team played an invaluable role in determining, preparing and recommending plans for excess or underused properties.

A Long-Term Vision

Other FasTracks initiatives include the renovation of Denver Union Station as a system-wide transit hub and the crown jewel of the RTD transit system, which serves a metro area of 2.8 million people. In May, RTD inaugurated a new underground bus concourse and launched the Free MetroRide shuttle service to complement an existing 16th Street Free MallRide, traveling along downtown Denver and connecting Denver Union Station with Civic Center Station. Over the summer, Denver’s Union Station will open a boutique hotel, gourmet restaurants, shops and other modern amenities for travelers, visitors and pedestrians. Dana Crawford, Denver’s renowned preservationist and the namesake of the station’s new Crawford Hotel, says the renovated train hall will be no less than “the city’s living room and the gateway to the West” when it reopens.

Elsewhere in the FasTracks system, Eagle P3, the largest public-private transit partnership ever attempted in the U.S., is slated to debut in 2016. The multipronged project comprises the East Rail Line to Denver International Airport, the Gold Line to the communities of Arvada and Wheat Ridge, the first segment of the Northwest Rail Line to the city of Westminster, and a new commuter rail maintenance facility in Globeville.

Also slated to open in 2016 are the I-225 Rail Line through the city of Aurora to the east of Denver and the U.S. 36 bus rapid transit service between Denver and the city of Boulder, giving RTD its biggest year yet for project openings. The North Metro Rail Line is expected to open in 2018, and new Park-n-Rides, improved suburb-to-suburb bus connections, and new transit-oriented development also are part of the FasTracks program.

Ridership on the Rise

RTD inaugurated the West Rail Line in April 2013, and the light rail line is running smoothly as part of the agency’s bus and rail operations side. Ridership is on the rise and expected to grow as connecting lines join the system in 2016. Commuters and tourists alike are enthralled with the line’s scenic route toward Jefferson County, which offers some of the best views of the Rockies west of Denver.

During its design and construction, the West Rail Line was described as being on the bleeding edge of what RTD set out to accomplish with the multibillion-dollar FasTracks program. Today, transit officials from Dallas, Los Angeles and other major metropolitan cities in the U.S. and abroad are examining the Denver model as they look to improve their own transit systems.

When it comes to initiating large transit projects, forging strong alliances and partnerships at the city, state and federal levels have made all the different. The West Rail Line team blazed a formidable trail for the entire FasTracks program.