



RECONNECTING COMMUNITIES: A VISION FOR TRANSPORTATION EQUITY IN COLORADO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A long history of racist infrastructure investment and continued transportation planning policies that prioritizes cars over communities has left many Coloradans unhealthy, unsafe, and disconnected. Providing and maintaining equitable transportation options for Colorado communities does more than get people from point A to point B. Transportation equity is essential for addressing systemic disparities in health outcomes and access to housing, education, employment, criminal justice, and recreation.¹ All people deserve access to reliable, affordable, and safe transportation options.

Rather than serve the needs of people and communities, transportation investments over the last 100 years have been focused on defending the rights of cars. This prioritization of cars has resulted in an endless positive feedback loop of highway expansion, increased number and speed of cars on the road, harmful emissions, and unsafe, unaffordable, inefficient conditions for any person who doesn't drive a car.²

- 5% of Colorado households have no vehicles available and 29.4% of households have only one vehicle available³. Over 270,000 Coloradans do not have access to any vehicle.
- Approximately 67,000 Coloradans eligible to drive are not licensed and have no choice but to rely on other forms of transportation.⁴
- Car ownership is financially unattainable for many Coloradans with an average annual cost of vehicle operation and ownership for a small sedan of \$7,230.⁵
- On average, "low-income households spend 37% of their annual income on transportation, almost twice the percentage of middle-income households."⁶

Approximately 40% of Coloradans live in disproportionately impacted communities (DICs)⁷ which generally have higher rates of public transportation usage than their white, higher-income counterparts. In Denver, more than 30% of commuters that make less than \$25,000 in annual income use public transportation to get to work.⁸ Unfortunately, public transportation and infrastructure spending don't mirror these ridership patterns. Denver's regional transit investment has prioritized building expensive light rail that serves suburban, low-ridership routes.⁹ Meanwhile, "the busiest transit route in the city—where the higher capacity of rail would have the most benefit—is a bus in mixed traffic."¹⁰

Transportation spending has systematically harmed minority communities, subjecting them to unsafe spaces, polluted air, and isolation from necessary destinations like healthcare facilities, recreational facilities, and schools. For instance, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) Central 70 project in 2019 degraded air quality, displaced 5% of the neighborhood, and increased the number of

¹ Denver Streets Partnership, *Denver Streets Partnership Strategic Framework*, 2.

² Hultin et al., *Recalibrating Transportation*, 2, 13.

³ "Vehicles Available," United States Census Bureau.

⁴ "S0101: Age and Sex," United States Census Bureau.

⁵ "Your Driving Costs," AAA.

⁶ Furuichi and Maniak, *Transportation and Land Use Planning Equity in Colorado*, 17.

⁷ Furuichi and Maniak, *Transportation and Land Use Planning Equity in Colorado*, 23.

⁸ Tan et al., "Amid the pandemic, public transit is highlighting inequalities in cities."

⁹ Spieler, "Racism has shaped public transit."

¹⁰ Spieler, "Racism has shaped public transit."



people living in unhealthy proximity to the highway.¹¹ The adjacent neighborhood of Elyria-Swansea is considered the most polluted in the country¹² and children living by the highway have asthma hospitalization rates “40% higher than Denver as a whole.”¹³

The safety of low-income and minority communities in Colorado is also threatened by the current transportation system. Fatality rates per 100 million miles traveled are “systematically higher for Black and Hispanic Americans for all modes and notably higher for vulnerable modes,” namely pedestrians and cyclists.¹⁴ People walking in lower-income communities are more likely to be struck and killed by drivers than those walking in middle- or high-income communities.¹⁵

Leaders across Colorado are currently presented with a unique opportunity to turn the tide on transportation. By the end of 2022, CDOT and Front Range metropolitan transportation organizations will prioritize more than \$4 billion in transportation funding.¹⁶ With an influx of new federal and state funding, Colorado transportation is at a unique crossroads. Now is the time for transportation stakeholders across the state to reset project priorities based on community needs and realign investments toward projects that reduce car dependency, provide safe passage for people, and prioritize equity.¹⁷ By realigning transportation funding priorities and infrastructure with the needs of communities, Colorado can move away from a system that serves cars and build a system that serves people.¹⁸ Reliable and affordable transportation “is the bridge to daily activities that keep us healthy, including a variety of food choices, safe environments, services, jobs, and schools.”¹⁹ When transportation is built and maintained with equity in mind, the benefits ripple far and wide by increasing jobs, stimulating the economy, and keeping communities connected.²⁰ A system built equitably works better for everyone.²¹

The following two case studies demonstrate how the injustices highlighted above are impacting Colorado communities today. These studies illustrate the transportation needs of local communities and shed light on different investment and infrastructure opportunities available to remedy existing injustices and offer a vision for a transportation system that truly serves all Coloradans.

¹¹ Schluntz and Hiatt, *Comments on Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, 11.

¹² Turkewitz, “Colorado Aims to Expand a Main Artery, but Beleaguered Neighbors Balk.”

¹³ Turkewitz, “Colorado Aims to Expand a Main Artery, but Beleaguered Neighbors Balk.”

¹⁴ Raifman and Choma, “Disparities in Activity and Traffic Fatalities by Race/Ethnicity,” 160.

¹⁵ Doyle, “Safety over speed week.”

¹⁶ Hultin et al., *Recalibrating Transportation*, 1.

¹⁷ Hultin et al., *Recalibrating Transportation*, 2.

¹⁸ Schluntz and Hiatt, *Comments on Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, 12.

¹⁹ Hariprasad, Hernandez, and Singh, *An Equity Action Guide*, 26.

²⁰ Hariprasad, Hernandez, and Singh, *An Equity Action Guide*, 28.

²¹ Hariprasad, Hernandez, and Singh, *An Equity Action Guide*, 8.



CASE STUDY 1: REGIONAL TRAILS IN ROUTT COUNTY

Routt County is home to a magnificent landscape of mountains and river valleys in Northwest Colorado on land first inhabited by the Ute tribe.²² Recreation and tourism are pillars of Routt County's economy today, and people are moving around differently than they used to. Housing, demographic and land use factors in Routt County are changing rapidly. Home prices have appreciated by 10–15% each year since 2015²³ resulting in workers needing to live in communities outside the city and commute to work.²⁴ These changes have necessitated the consideration of Future Growth Areas, physical areas that have or are planned for new growth and development in Routt County.²⁵ One such area is West Steamboat—home to the Steamboat II, Heritage Park, and Silver Spur Estates neighborhoods.²⁶

Current transportation conditions in Steamboat and Routt County have been molded to serve the tourism and recreational needs of the area and haven't transitioned to serve new regional growth and development. While the Steamboat Springs transit service is generally financially accessible with high ridership, the geographic layout of the bus routes does not serve many that live and work in the area. Similarly, the Yampa River Core Trail, a paved multi-use path that runs through Steamboat Springs and along the Yampa River, terminates within the City of Steamboat Springs and does not connect to West Steamboat.²⁷ Transportation infrastructure that exists largely within the boundaries of the city leaves residents of West Steamboat and other surrounding areas without access to connected trail networks or convenient transit connections.

A recent Yampa Valley Community Health Needs Assessment recognized transportation as one of four "drivers" of health.²⁸ Routt County has recognized the need to "think regionally and move forward with big and unprecedented transportation projects" while giving equal consideration to those community members who rely on walking, biking, and transit.²⁹ Further development of the Core Trail and other regional trails is an equitable, innovative, and health-promoting solution that will benefit all Routt County community members who need to stay connected to school, jobs, and recreational opportunities. Respondents in a public outreach survey done in March 2022 identified extending the Core Trail and providing inter-connectivity between growth centers as two key mobility themes.³⁰ Regional trails to surrounding areas like Phippsburg, Stagecoach, and even Steamboat Springs would provide residents and visitors with key connections to services and the means to hike or bike into neighboring towns.³¹

²² "City to recognize Indigenous people of Yampa Valley," Steamboat Pilot & Today.

²³ CushingTerrell, *Routt County Master Plan*, 35.

²⁴ CushingTerrell, *Routt County Master Plan*, 42.

²⁵ CushingTerrell, *Routt County Master Plan*, 27.

²⁶ "About Us," Steamboat II Metropolitan District.

²⁷ "Yampa River Core Trail," Colorado Trail Explorer.

²⁸ Health Management Associates, *Yampa Valley Community Health Needs Assessment*, 3.

²⁹ CushingTerrell, *Routt County Master Plan*, 42.

³⁰ CushingTerrell, *Routt County Master Plan*, 22.

³¹ Corser and Page-Allen, *Oak Creek Comprehensive Plan*, 46-47.



CASE STUDY 2: TRANSIT IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

The town of Antonito sits at the southern end of the San Luis Valley, approximately 6 miles north of the Colorado-New Mexico border. Antonito is located in Conejos County on the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Apache, Kiowa, Pueblo, Navajo, and Ute tribal peoples.³² Conejos County is considered a county of persistent poverty with 20% of residents earning incomes below the federal poverty level.³³ From 2016–2020, the median annual household income was only \$33,611.³⁴ A startling 30% of households earn under \$20,000.³⁵ Conejos County also has a higher proportion of older adults over the age of 65 years (19%),³⁶ communities of color (55%),³⁷ and people with disabilities (20%)³⁸ than the average Colorado community.

The unique geographic, socioeconomic, and demographic positioning of Antonito presents a need for affordable and efficient regional transit options. A majority of Conejos County residents commute north for work—22% to the city of Alamosa which has 43% of jobs in the San Luis Valley region.³⁹ Conejos County residents spend approximately 40% of their income on transportation.⁴⁰ For those that do not have access to a vehicle or do not drive, very few transportation options exist to get to and from Antonito. There are zero local, regional, or interregional transit providers that connect Antonito to surrounding towns or counties⁴¹, even though transportation resources are the third most commonly identified community health need in the region⁴² and more than 75% of older adults and adults with disabilities said they have trouble finding transportation for medical appointments in 2019.⁴³

Innovative transportation solutions in the San Luis Valley can transform connections for hardworking community members whose needs are not served by the current system. Investment in transit would eliminate or drastically regional dependence on car ownership—potentially saving thousands of dollars each year that could be used on food, housing, and healthcare—while improving connectivity and reliable access to vital healthcare services. Colorado has an amazing opportunity to provide these communities with the services and connections they need. It is time that residents of Antonito and other areas of the San Luis Valley be able to lean into their rich tradition of non-vehicular travel and benefit from a system built to serve them. Maintaining the status quo by not acting now to transform transportation will continue to cost San Luis Valley communities greatly.

³² "San Luis Valley: The Cradle of Colorado," Colorado's Museum Trail.

³³ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 36.

³⁴ "QuickFacts Conejos County," United States Census Bureau.

³⁵ San Luis Valley Community Action Agency, *Community Needs Assessment*, 46.

³⁶ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 7.

³⁷ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 7.

³⁸ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 8.

³⁹ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 36.

⁴⁰ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 10.

⁴¹ Felsburg, Holt and Ullevig, *San Luis Valley Transit Plan*, 12-14, 37.

⁴² San Luis Valley Health, *Community Health Needs Assessment Report*, 3.

⁴³ Colorado Department of Transportation, *San Luis Valley Coordinated Public Transit & Human Services Transportation Plan*, 9.

