

Downtown Denver Circulator History and Funding: White Paper January 2013

Introduction

The Downtown Denver Circulator (Circulator) is a planned bus transit shuttle service that is intended to complement the Downtown Denver 16th Street Mall Shuttle and local bus network. The Circulator will connect Denver Union Station (DUS) with employment centers and other destinations throughout downtown Denver. The Circulator project was conceived as part of the 2004 Regional Transportation District (RTD) FasTracks Plan.

FasTracks is RTD's comprehensive transit expansion plan for the Denver region. In November 2004, Denver metro area voters approved a 0.4 percent sales and use tax increase (4 cents on a \$10 dollar purchase) and the concomitant bonding capacity for the Regional Transportation District to build out the FasTracks Program. The Program is a multi-billion dollar project that consists of nine rail lines (new or extended); one bus rapid transit (BRT) line; redevelopment of Denver Union Station (DUS); a new Commuter Rail Maintenance Facility (CRMF); an expanded light rail maintenance facility; and increased bus service including the Circulator.

At completion, FasTracks will add approximately 93 miles of commuter rail, 28 miles of light rail, and 18 miles of BRT most connecting to Downtown Denver at DUS. The redeveloped hub will significantly increase the number of transit passengers coming into DUS on route to their final destination elsewhere in downtown. The FasTracks plan included the provision for increased downtown circulation to serve these new riders.

FasTracks Circulator Definition

The FasTracks Program included funding for a new circulator system to serve commuters arriving at DUS by establishing connections to Civic Center and other downtown destinations. The Circulator addresses travel demand modeling for the FasTracks Plan which indicated that additional capacity would be needed for downtown transit passenger distribution as the 16th Street FREE MallRide would not be able to accommodate the increased demand. Figure 1 shows the map from the FasTracks Plan which identified the general area that would need to be served by the Circulator. These bullet points from the 2004 FasTracks Plan defined the following performance standards and characteristics for the Circulator:

- Service frequency that minimizes dwell times
- Quick service from one end of Downtown to the other, with travel times comparable to the 16th Street Mall Shuttle (dependent on RTD's ability to receive agreement from the City and County of Denver for dedicated lanes on the Circulator's alignment).
- Uniform, bi-directional service throughout Downtown that is visible and user-friendly
- Fare free service for RTD patrons
- Service to office and residential areas
- Technology that is reliable, provides adequate capacity, and is environmentally friendly.
- Easy and effective transfer at Denver Union Station
- Service that complements and enhances the 16th Street Mall Shuttle by providing sufficient capacity and connecting additional areas of transit demand

The FasTracks Plan noted that the specific route and characteristics of the Circulator would be defined as part of the City and County of Denver’s (the City) Downtown Multimodal Access Plan (DMAP) that was being completed at the time. It was noted that RTD would incorporate the final alternative(s) into the FasTracks Plan.

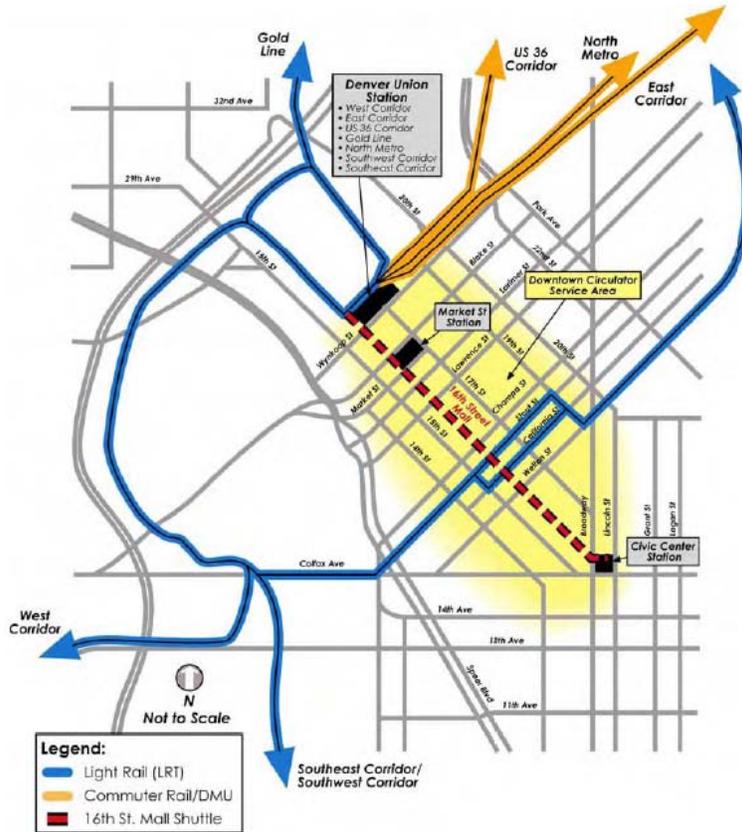


Figure 1 - FasTracks Plan Map Showing Circulator Service Area

FasTracks Plan Circulator Funding

The original FasTracks financial plan included funding for the Circulator as follows:

Capital

- Bus procurement
- Basic signage

Operations & Maintenance

- Annual O&M based on service between DUS and Civic Center
- Security

Denver’s Downtown Multimodal Access Plan (DMAP)

In 2005 the City’s Public Works Policy and Planning Department led the development of the Downtown Denver Multimodal Access Plan (DMAP). The main goal of DMAP is stated as “a detailed, integrated plan for vehicular, freight, pedestrian, bicycle and transit access into and throughout Downtown for the next 20 to 25 years.” Both RTD and the Downtown Denver Partnership participated in the DMAP study as stakeholders but did not provide any funding to the study. The DMAP transit recommendations for Downtown Denver are summarized below.

- Maintain the 16th Street Mall Shuttle as the primary transit corridor.
- Add a second shuttle to Downtown that distributes regional transit riders to destinations along 18th Street, 19th Street, Broadway, and Lincoln Street.
- Connect major destinations and existing and planned transit;
 - Denver Union Station
 - Cross-mall light rail stations (California & 16th/18th and Stout & 16th/18th)
 - Civic Center Station
 - Cultural Complex

The route for the Circulator was developed as part of the DMAP study as shown in Figure 2. It was determined that by placing the shuttle on 18th Street and 19th Street it would not compete directly with the 16th Street Mall Shuttle and would directly serve 55% of the Downtown employment.



Figure 2 - Circulator Route as Defined in DMAP

DMAP also recommended the following additional capital elements that were not included in the FasTracks financial planning for the Circulator.

- Dedicated shared bus and bike lane on 18th Street and 19th Street
- Off-street bus turnaround at 12th Avenue and Acoma Street (across from the Cultural Complex)
- Enhanced shuttle stop designs
- Buses to accommodate service with 75 second headways during the peak periods

DMAP Funding Provisions

DMAP notes that the plan provides visions and goals for the City and that the recommendations will likely be implemented incrementally as both public and private resources become available. However, it did outline early action items for the City to prioritize. The construction of the Circulator Shuttle was included as an early action item and is outlined as follows in DMAP:

- *New Circulator Shuttle – All of the FasTracks projects are expected to be complete by the year 2016.....Based on ridership forecasts, the new Downtown circulator shuttle must be operational by 2013. This infrastructure project will include an exclusive concrete lane on both 18th and 19th Streets, shuttle stop improvements, bus turn-around at 12th Avenue and Acoma Street and Denver Union Station, and acquisition of the buses. The implementation of this project will require a close working relationship between various city departments, affected neighborhoods, and the Regional Transportation District.*

The DMAP discussion of the Circulator did not include any indication of financial responsibility for the specific capital elements. However, a general Fiscal Note was included in the overall Implementation chapter:

- *The early action items listed [in DMAP] are intended to provide priority with respect to the recommendations of this plan. The actual funding amount and timing will be accomplished through the City's capital funding prioritization process, which considers all of the City's capital needs and any external funding sources.*

RTD 2010 Study

RTD completed an internal study in 2010 to solidify an operating plan for the Circulator. This study allowed for the RTD capital and operating funding assumptions associated with the project to be updated based on a more near-term plan for the project as opposed to the long-term vision that was defined in DMAP. The following refinements were made to the Circulator project based on the 2010 RTD study.

- Implementation must coincide with the opening of the DUS bus terminal in 2014
- Bus bulbs (see Figure 3) were recommended to provide transit priority for the Circulator stops since it had previously been determined by the City that a dedicated bus lane on 18th Street and 19th Street would not be feasible.

- The service plan was defined as a headway based schedule with five minute peak, ten minute off-peak, and 15 minute weekend headways.
- Fare-free service was recommended to allow for faster boarding

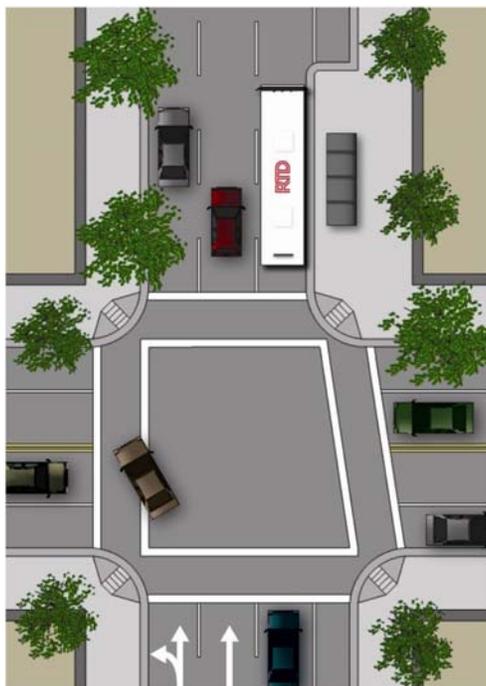


Figure 3- Example Bus Bulb

The capital budget associated with the Circulator was updated based on a refined project scope of 12 buses required to operate the five minute peak period service with spares and the construction of bus bulbs. The annual operating cost was estimated at approximately \$2 Million per year based on the defined service levels.

Current Status of the FasTracks Program

Both the FasTracks Plan and DMAP were completed when it was assumed that the FasTracks Program would have enough funding from the 2004 ballot initiative to complete the full program by 2017. While significant progress has been made on multiple FasTracks projects, the FasTracks Program has encountered challenges since the passage of the 2004 ballot initiative. Construction material cost escalation and falling sales tax revenues in particular have impacted the schedule and budget for the program.

The following FasTracks projects are fully funded and anticipated to be complete by the dates specified.

- West Rail Line – 12 mile light rail line between DUS and the Jefferson County Government Center in Golden. The West Rail Line will be the first FasTracks rail corridor to open on April 26, 2013.
- Denver Union Station – multimodal transportation hub which will integrate light rail, commuter rail, intercity rail (Amtrak), RTD bus service including US 36 BRT, the 16th Street Mall Shuttle, Downtown Denver Circulator, and intercity buses, taxis, shuttles, vans, limousines, bicycle and

pedestrians. The light rail station is currently in use and will serve many more trains with the opening of the West Rail Line. The underground bus facility is scheduled to open in 2014 and the commuter rail station will open in 2016 with the Eagle P3 Project.

- US 36 BRT – RTD has partnered with the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) to construct an Express Lane in each direction to serve buses and carpool and toll vehicles. The project will be complete in 2015 at which time RTD will begin incrementally increasing bus service levels.
- Eagle P3 Project – Public private partnership that includes the East Rail Line, Gold Line, Northwest Electrified Segment, and the CRMF. RTD selected Denver Transit Partners to complete the large commuter rail project by 2016. The East Rail Line will connect DUS to the Denver International Airport. The Gold Line provides service between DUS and Ward Road in Wheat Ridge. The Northwest Electrified Segment will provide service between DUS and South Westminster.
- I-225 Rail Line – 11 mile light rail line serving Aurora which will connect the existing Southeast Light Rail Nine Mile Station to the future Peoria/Smith East Rail Line Station. The project will be complete by 2016.

RTD updates project costs and completes a full financial analysis on an annual basis. This Annual Program Evaluation (APE) is used to determine an updated schedule for completion of the program. In 2008, it was determined that there was a funding shortfall and it would not be feasible to complete the entire program by the 2020 timeframe without additional funding. As such, it was assumed that RTD would pursue another ballot measure to secure additional funding to complete the FasTracks Program by 2020. The 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 RTD APE schedules assumed a successful sales tax increase by the fall of 2012. In April 2012, the RTD Board of Directors decided not to pursue a sales tax for additional funding for FasTracks. At that point, the schedule for all of the remaining underfunded FasTracks projects (those not specified above including the Circulator) became uncertain.

All FasTracks APE financial plans through 2011 assumed full funding of the Circulator capital improvements (as defined in the FasTracks Plan and refined with the 2010 study) and O&M costs associated with the route defined in DMAP.

Current Operating and Financial Assumptions

After the RTD Board of Directors decided not to pursue a sales tax increase in the short-term, RTD staff evaluated the timing and need for the Circulator. Staff determined that with the projects identified above the Circulator is still a necessary component of the FasTracks plan that cannot be delayed past 2014. The ridership modeling confirmed that with the funded projects there is a need for additional peak period service between DUS and Civic Center to avoid overcrowding of the mall shuttle. The modeling also confirmed that there is adequate capacity on the mall shuttle to handle the off-peak period demand for downtown circulation.

In addition to looking at the Circulator ridership demand from the funded projects, RTD staff also conducted a passenger survey on the 16th Street Mall Shuttle to understand the current profile of mall shuttle passengers and future Circulator passengers with respect to transfers from other RTD services. The mall shuttle survey showed that 80% of the current mall shuttle passengers are RTD revenue passengers which means that they have directly transferred to or from another RTD service or have a

valid RTD pass (EcoPass, Monthly pass or Student Pass). It is anticipated that the Circulator would have a similar percentage of revenue passengers. As such, it is still recommended that the Circulator operate as a fare free service. The passenger survey also found that approximately 45% of the existing mall shuttle passengers were going to or coming from an area that would be served by the proposed 18th Street/19th Street Circulator route.

With the updated ridership analysis and passenger survey results, RTD staff gained a better understanding of the near-term operating requirements for the Circulator. In general, the Circulator requirements are similar to those determined from previous plans with two exceptions:

- RTD provides sufficient downtown service with the 16th Street Mall Shuttle to meet the mid-day and evening ridership demands.
- There is a need for increased service between DUS and Civic Center to distribute passengers from DUS to downtown employment centers but the modeling did not support the need for service south of Colfax Avenue to the cultural center.

Therefore, in summer 2012 RTD approached the City and the Downtown Denver Partnership with a request to help fund all-day operations of the Circulator with service to the cultural center. The three agencies were working together to develop an agreement to share fiscal responsibility for the maintenance of the 16th Street Mall and the operations of the Circulator was added to that conversation since it is a closely related issue. The mall shuttle and Circulator will work together to provide a comprehensive and efficient transit circulation system for Downtown Denver.

Several meetings with the three agencies were held to discuss funding of both the mall maintenance and Circulator operations. The meetings were a combination of the regular quarterly 16th Street Mall Steering Committee meetings as well as supplementary meetings of a funding task force recommended by RTD's general manager, Phil Washington, and the Denver Mayor, Michael Hancock. An agreement was reached to share responsibility for the mall maintenance but both the City and Partnership indicated that they would not be able to contribute any funding to the operations of the Circulator.

As such, RTD is moving forward with an operating plan for the Circulator that can be funded without support from the City or Partnership and meets the RTD needs. This revised operating plan is shown in Figure 4 which includes a shortened route and reduced service hours. The revised service plan is anticipated to cost approximately \$800,000 per year in operations and is included in the most recent FasTracks financial plan which assumes no tax increase. This operating plan is considered Phase 1 for the Circulator and can be expanded in the future to include all day operations or service to the cultural center if additional funding becomes available in the future.

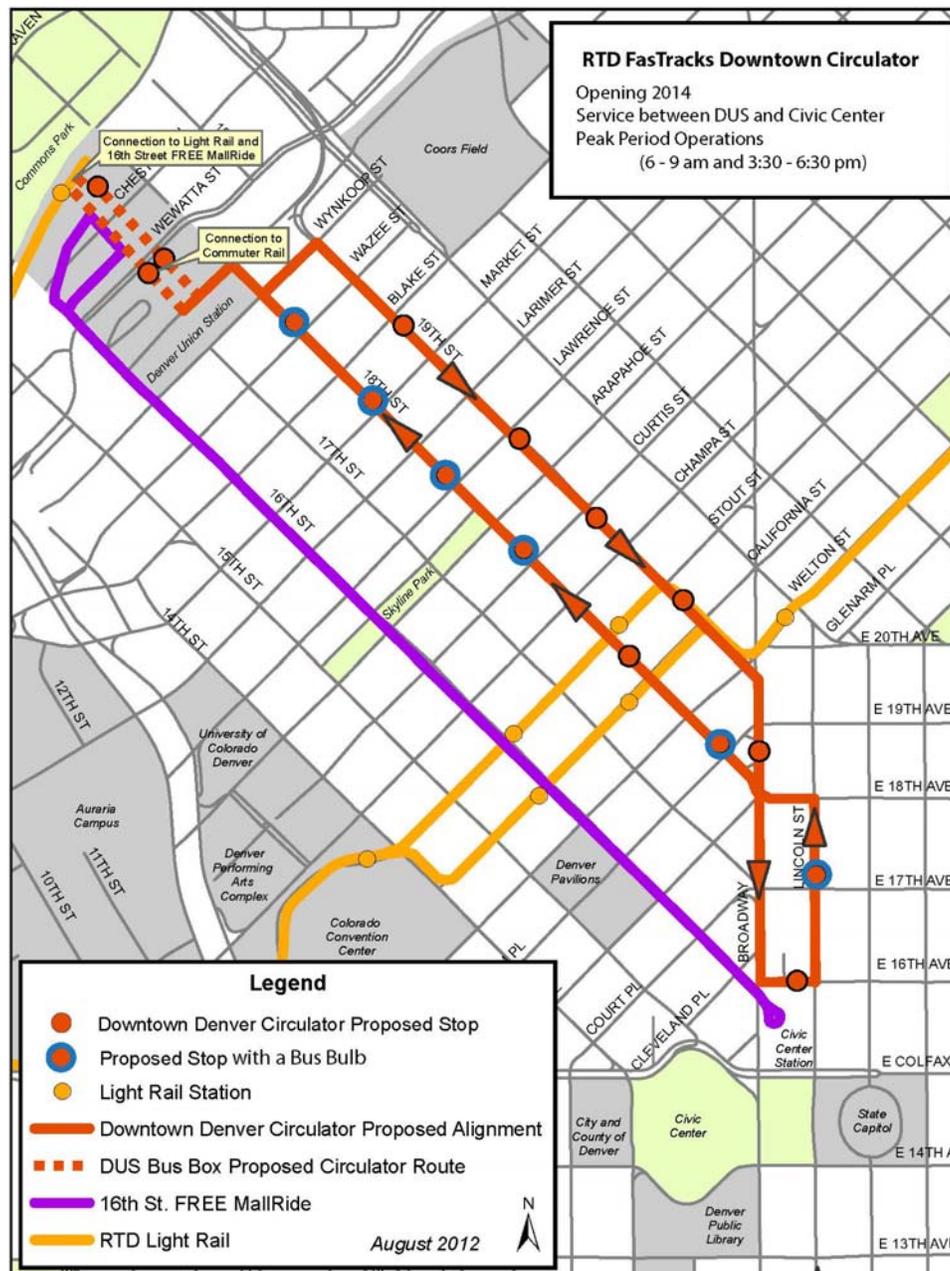


Figure 4 - Updated Circulator Route

Near Term Next Steps

RTD is still committed to the full capital investment in the Circulator and the \$16.9 Million capital investment is included in the most recent FasTracks financial plan which does not include a tax increase. This \$16.9 Million is for capital elements associated with Phase 1 of the Circulator as shown in RTD is moving forward with bus procurement of a specialized fleet and the engineering design of bus bulbs on 18th Street. RTD is working with the City and Partnership on the design of the bus stops including urban design elements such as shelters.

RTD is also initiating a marketing plan for the Circulator which will be led by the RTD Marketing department. RTD understands that a unique brand identity including a name is critical for the success of the Circulator project. The Circulator vehicles will be distinguishable from other RTD buses that serve downtown. However, it should be clear that the Circulator is an RTD service so the buses will be uniquely branded while maintaining the overall RTD brand identity – similar to the 16th Street MallRide. RTD is envisioning a public process including input from both the City and Partnership to determine a name for the service.

Long Term Opportunities for the Circulator

The long term vision for the Circulator is still the DMAP route with service characteristics outlined in the 2010 RTD study. RTD is moving forward with the implementation of Phase 1 with the understanding that the service will be expanded in the future as O&M funding becomes available from the FasTracks budget or outside funding sources. In addition, the City and Partnership have indicated that the City will be leading a planning study for the Civic Center area which will include transportation. RTD is fully in support of including the Circulator in any future studies regarding mobility in the Civic Center or Golden Triangle neighborhoods and does not believe that the Phase 1 Circulator project precludes any recommendations that would come out of these future studies.