

Rails Reach Wheat Ridge, But Critics Remain

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Commuter rail service finally came to Wheat Ridge on Friday, April 26. But while many celebrated, some were more pessimistic weeks earlier.

The G (Gold) Line carries passengers 11.2 miles between Wheat Ridge and downtown Denver's Union Station, through Arvada, Adams County and Denver, in 27 minutes, traveling at up to 65 mph. The project is part of the Denver Regional Transportation District's 2004 voter-approved FasTracks program to expand transit across the Denver metro region.

It is the third and final commuter rail line to open as part of the \$2.2 billion federally-funded Eagle public-private partnership and is operated by RTD concessionaire Denver Transit Partners. The company also operates the A Line to Denver International Airport and the B Line to Westminster. RTD spokeswoman Laurie Huff said a cost estimate for the G Line was not available due to cost overlaps with other commuter projects.

Commuter rail trains carry more passengers than light rail, are designed to travel faster over longer distances with fewer stops and offer larger seats, overhead storage, luggage towers and bicycle racks, Huff noted.

G Line riders pay a one-way \$3 fare with eight stops: Union Station, 41st and Fox, Pecos Junction, Clear Creek and Federal, 60th Avenue and Sheridan at Arvada Gold Strike, Olde Town Arvada, Arvada Ridge and Wheat Ridge Ward at 52nd Avenue and Ward Road.

All stations except Union Station have parking, and some may charge fees. However, Huff noted many park-and-ride lots will be free for up to the first 90 days, except Olde Town Arvada, which is city-owned.

“We are really excited for the opening of the G line bringing visitors and employees to the city,” Mayor Bud Starker said in an RTD news release. “The new commuter line also offers our residents easy access to downtown Denver and a stress-free ride to Denver International Airport. Wheat Ridge employees can choose to live in communities throughout the metro Denver area without adding a long commute.”

Each two-car G Line train can carry 170 passengers, with seating for 91 and two wheelchair spaces per car.

“People like rail, especially commuter rail,” Huff stated. “The A Line is well ahead of its yearly projections and we’re glad to finally have the G Line operating.”

Ridership estimate questioned

RTD forecast G Line ridership at 9,000 passenger trips per day in the first year and 12,900 daily trips by 2035. But those were fuzzy numbers to Wheat Ridge city councilman Larry Matthews.

“I really question those numbers,” he said at an April 1 study session. “There’s only 290 parking spaces in the parking lot. My concern is that these numbers are looked at as being cast in stone and a lot of times they don’t work out. I just don’t trust RTD numbers.”

Matthews added the original plan for the station was to include buses.

“I want to figure out how much business that train brings to a dead-end station and what it will actually generate,” he said. “If the ridership doesn’t reach their numbers, we’ve got to start building roads. And this is an end-of-the-line station, make no mistake about it. When it comes to RTD, all roads lead to Rome and all trains lead to Denver.”

Huff provided commuter rail ridership estimates and first-year actual ridership numbers for the A Line at a forecast of 18,600 passenger trips per day and actual ridership of 18,200. The B Line was forecast to make 800 passenger trips per day and had 1,300. Huff noted those

forecasts assumed the A, B and G lines would all open in 2016. And Huff stated actual ridership for the G Line could cause a drop in B Line ridership due to the belief that some G Line passengers rode the B Line before the G Line opened.

RTD celebrates 50 years of service this year and touts its FasTracks projects as good for the economy, with \$5.3 billion invested or committed across the region. Every \$1 invested in transit infrastructure translates into a \$4 return over 20 years, RTD noted in a study, and created 13,000 direct full-time jobs since 2005.

Ridership on rapid transit lines has remained relatively steady, the study noted. The E, F and H lines have the highest ridership and continue to increase, while the A Line experienced a 20 percent increase in ridership after its first year.

Randal O'Toole is the director of the Independence Institute's Transportation Policy Center and author of a book, "Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need."

He wrote in a March 2019 blog post on the institute website that in 2004, RTD estimated that building the A and G lines would cost about \$1 billion, but had spent \$3.1 billion on the two lines through 2017. Since 2004, O'Toole said RTD spent \$3 billion on light-rail lines that were estimated to cost less than \$1.5 billion. Huff said she could not comment on O'Toole's cost estimates.

O'Toole said in an interview that RTD built the G Line "because it's the shortest and was all they could afford to build" currently.

"It's foolish for them to say rail is better than bus," he added. "The Flatiron Express (bus service between Denver and Boulder) costs a lot less and significantly relieves congestion compared to trains."

O'Toole added rail lines wear out and need replacement after about 30 years. He noted RTD's oldest light-rail line is 25 years old. While he admitted buses are usually replaced every 12-15 years, the cost is much less.

"Rail requires its own infrastructure, buses don't," O'Toole said. "RTD should stop building rail service and buy more buses."

Editor's note: this is the first in a series about the recently begun G Line commuter rail service in Wheat Ridge.