Colfax Bus Rapid Transit Update

It has been some time since anyone in the city has updated the public on the status of the Colfax Bus Rapid Transit project (BRT). The last official public meeting was held last August. At that time, they refused to answer the most pressing questions regarding issues that the public is most concerned about, namely where is the traffic study, what will be the diversion of traffic onto neighborhood streets i.e., 13th, 14th, 17th and 18th, and the results of the environmental analysis. They spent the majority of the time discussing branding the line (four alternatives for Lynz) and street art at the stations. Only five questions were answered in front of the audience. They referred everyone to talk "one on one" with staff. This is an intentionally deceptive practice that avoids providing information to the entire audience and controls the dissemination of information.

The proposed project is a reconstruction of Colfax Avenue from Broadway to Yosemite. The bus lanes will be center running in the street with stations or concrete plazas for bus boarding. Colfax will be reduced to two lanes, one in each direction with limited left turn opportunities at signalized intersections. Parking will continue to be allowed along both outside curbs.

New information has been added to the BRT website, but no formal announcement of this information was sent to the public. The new information is quite disconcerting when compared to the 2016 study that initiated this project. A final report was released in 2018.

Modified Ridership Estimates

The original study forecast increased ridership per day (rpd) to 41,000 rpd in 2040 and 55,000 rpd in 2050. Pre pandemic ridership on the 15/15L was 22,000 rpd. This is an increase of 86% from existing for 2040 and a 150% increase for 2050. These are significant increases which would justify this project. The 2018 report revised these original estimates. The ridership increased to 43,000 rpd but moved the time to 2035. However, the website has announced that ridership will increase by 30% or 7600 rpd in 2040. The 30% increase is presented positively but is a decrease of 81% from the original forecast and an 82% reduction from the revised forecast. This number alone calls into question the viability of this project, since ridership has been reduced from the pre pandemic years and would only be a net increase of 1600 – 5600 from pre pandemic ridership based on existing RTD ridership in the corridor.

Construction Cost Estimate

The original study estimated that the center running BRT could be built for $150 M, which was a substantial reduction from the cost of rail alternatives, thereby justifying the selection of buses over rail. The website now states the cost will be $250 M -$300 M with no explanation of the significant cost increase. Based on the past 12 years of the Hancock Administration failing to complete major projects on time and on budget, the $300 M estimate is more likely the cost if nor higher.

Parking Study

At the August meeting a parking analysis was presented That stated only 100 spaces would be removed and that sides streets could accommodate this loss. The website now states the loss will be 300 spaces but still maintains that side streets can accommodate the loss. I pointed out to the consultant project

manager that the analysis was bogus because it did not take into account the increased density along the corridor per the adopted East Denver plans. Throughout the City where new high rises have been built, it has resulted in on street parking problems because the on site parking requirement was reduced in the 2010 rewrite of the zoning code. So as density is developed, the side streets will be congested with parked cars which is already quite obvious in Uptown and Capitol Hill. The analysis needs to consider forecast development and compare parking impacts for 2040. They also need to explain the increase in lost parking spaces from 100 to 300, especially to the businesses since traffic volumes on Colfax will be reduced substantially.

Traffic Diversion

This is the critical issue of neighborhood concern which the city has refused to address for seven years. The answer to this question is always that will be addressed in the traffic study, but the study is not forthcoming although I was told by the consultant at the August meeting that it had been submitted to the city. As the former City Traffic Engineer for Denver, I conducted my own analysis. We typically use a capacity number of 16,000 vehicles per day (vpd) for a two lane roadway. It can be somewhat higher if the roadway is unconstrained i.e., no on street parking. The study states that Colfax is presently carrying 35,000 vpd at Colorado Boulevard which is the congestion point for the corridor. I assumed that Colfax would not carry capacity and would be reduced to 12,000 – 14,000 vpd or approximately a 22,000 vpd diversion. Assuming an equal distribution for analysis purposes that would result in an 11,000 vpd increase on the 13th/14th and 17th/18th Avenues. This is a significant volume increase which would forego the city proposal to make these streets two way unless their goal is to totally cripple traffic movement in East Denver. The city estimates that travel times on these routes will increase by 1-7 minutes and on Colfax 6-9 minutes depending on the length of your commute. However, without the actual traffic study these numbers cannot be verified. I made no attempt to calculate the increased delay since I do not have adequate numbers to make an estimate.

Signal Pre-emption or Bus Priority Signalization

The city has stated that they intend to use signal pre-emption or bus priority signalization to allow the buses to move faster along the corridor. They cite Cleveland as the example they are copying. Unfortunately, they haven't checked recently since Cleveland discontinued this practice. Again, asking which signals will have pre-emption, the city refuses to give an answer and describes the operation as being implemented at all 18 of the signalized intersections. This is frankly impossible if you understand how pre-emption works. Some signals simply cannot be pre-empted, namely Broadway/Lincoln, York/Josephine, Colorado Boulevard, Monaco Parkway and Quebec Street unless your goal is massive traffic congestion in East Denver. I would also include Grant/Logan. I have repeatedly asked how triple pre-emption is going to work and either get no answer or told their experts will figure it out.

A Better Alternative

If you place the buses in the outside lanes, BRT can be operational in a year at less cost than they have already committed to the consultant. They have money obligated which would cover this expense. They simply need to build bulb outs at each of the stops, like what Aurora has already done, so the buses stop in the through lane rather than the parking lane as they do today. Then they need to simply make any signal controller upgrades, if necessary, provide signage and pavement markings, and install the pre-

emption detectors at the signals and in the buses. This would allow us to test BRT for success at minimal cost.

If this administration and staff at Transportation and Infrastructure are so supportive of transit, why wouldn't they try to get this improvement to the public as fast as possible rather than wait until 2027-2028 for $300 M? There are two reasons for this. The first is ego. This allows them to take pictures and publish articles on what they have done. They don't care that this alternative is extremely expensive with no guarantee of success. The second is far more important and decidedly political. If you spent $300 M on an improvement, what is the likelihood that any politician in our lifetime would have the guts to rip it out if it is a complete failure? The answer is very simple – we would be stuck with this for an extensive period, possibly decades, as they attempt to make it work. They now cite the new BRT lanes in Albuquerque as a model of success for this alternative. However, they fail to mention that the Mayor of Albuquerque recently stated that he thought this project was a mistake.

I have been a supporter of mass transit for my entire professional career starting with working to implement the heavy rail (subway system) in Washington, D.C. I worked with RTD as the city representative to develop and implement light rail in Denver. My goal has always been to support implementation of the best transit system we can develop. This proposal isn't it.