

Case Study: Roaring Fork Transportation Authority's Approach to Rural Transportation

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[Roaring Fork Transportation Authority](#) (RFTA) delivers robust transit services to connect residents, as well as thousands of visitors, along the Roaring Fork Valley to economic centers and other essential services. Beginning its operations in 1983, RFTA is the second largest transit system in Colorado and the largest rural transit system in the United States. It acts as a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) for a rural region of Colorado, roughly 150 miles west of Denver. Needing to connect varying groups to different destination types, RFTA prioritizes innovation and adaptiveness. It was the first rural transit agency to operate a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in 2013. The BRT system provides services 18 hours a day, operating at ten-minute intervals between buses during peak hours.

While not under the jurisdiction of any of Colorado's five Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), RFTA operates in one of Colorado's ten rural Transportation Planning Regions (TPRs)—the Intermountain. A Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), developed for the Intermountain TPR, addresses transportation planning needs and priorities unique to the area. The region-specific plan aligns with both the Statewide Transportation and Transit Plans, mirroring overarching key State transportation goals of mobility, safety, and asset management. The state's mobility goal emphasizes reducing congestion time and improving connectivity across all modes while reducing environmental impacts, supporting operations, and providing transportation options. Safety aims to move Colorado toward zero transportation related deaths. Finally, asset management prioritizes a high-quality transportation network by aiming to maintain a consistent state of good repair.¹

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) is the largest rural transportation system in the United States, transporting 4.8 million riders across 5.2 million miles in 2022.
- 380+ employees operate 125 buses across a 70-mile region.

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- VelociRFTA Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service along the 42-mile SH 82 corridor from Glenwood Springs to Aspen
- Coordinated first-last mile commuting options with WE-cycle public bicycle share services
- Grand Hogback Route commuter service between Glenwood Springs and Rifle, along I-70 and SH 6 corridors

¹ Colorado Department of Transportation, [CDOT Statewide Transportation Plan](#)

RFTA connects several rural communities to employment opportunities in the Roaring Fork Valley—especially in Aspen, Colorado. It seeks to expand to more towns along the I-70 and maintain service along the State highway 82 corridor. RFTA service expansion and project improvements address the needs along the corridor beyond simply service to and from bedroom communities for workforce supporting economic hubs, to include service within localities for access to local amenities. RFTA takes a varied economic approach, as evidenced the [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\) policy](#) and the 2018 [Southwest Energy Efficiency Project \(SWEET\) report](#).

Background and Demographics

In 1993, the City of Aspen and Pitkin County merged transit systems to create the Roaring Fork Transit Agency (RTA) to establish an effective transportation authority to guide regional development. In 2000, building upon the established mission of the RTA, voters in seven jurisdictions within the Roaring Fork Valley created the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority to better support the joint expansion of transit and trails programs in the region. Through various mergers and the joining of additional municipalities into the agency, RFTA expanded its operations and services along the corridor.

In 1997, before its merger into RFTA, the Roaring Fork Railroad Holding Authority purchased the Rio Grande Railroad Corridor in the Roaring Fork Valley and effectively railbanked the rail corridor or preserved the use the out-of-service system as a trail until rail service was established. This interim trail use of railbanked corridors has preserved thousands of miles of rail corridors that would otherwise have been abandoned. the former railroad right-of-way for trail use and future rail and transportation services. Today, the RFTA transit network provides approximately 70 miles of service spanning 3 counties, covering 40 miles from Aspen to Glenwood Springs and an additional 30 miles between Glenwood Springs and Rifle. A recent onboard survey conducted by the agency shows that roughly 60-70 percent of total ridership is made up of people of color, with 50-60 percent of all passengers identifying as Latinx.

Table 1: RFTA Timeline

RFTA Creation and Expansion	
1993	Roaring Fork Transit Agency is created by means of Intergovernmental Agreement between the City of Aspen and Pitkin County, who merged their separate transit systems to achieve economies of scale
1997	Roaring Fork Railroad Holding Authority (RFRHA) acquires Rio Grande Railroad corridor in the Roaring Fork Valley
2000	Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) is created by voters in seven jurisdictions within the Roaring Fork Valley
2001	RFRHA is merged into RFTA
2002	Roaring Fork Transit Agency is merged into RFTA along with its employees and equipment
2005	Residents of the Town of New Castle votes to join RFTA
2013	Bus rapid transit VelociRFTA begins operations
2022	RFTA completes 4.2 million system-wide passenger trips

RFTA co-manages the Rio Grande Railroad Corridor and Rio Grande Trail with three counties: Pitkin, Eagle, and Garfield County. Pitkin County has a population of 17,358 with a median household income of

\$96,123. The median house price in Pitkin County is \$693,000.² Eagle County has a population of 55,731 and a median household income of \$98,887, with residents paying \$709,700 for a median priced home.³ Garfield County has a population of 61,685, a median household income of \$82,772, and a median housing price of \$471,000.⁴ In the three counties, 22.46 percent of households speak a language other than English. The largest minority population across the RFTA service area identifies as Hispanic or Latino, making up 10.72 percent of the population in Pitkin; 30.24 percent in Eagle; and 31.71 percent of the population in Garfield.

Planning Process

The RFTA [2019 Strategic Plan](#) provides a framework for decision making, budgeting, and daily operations for the organization. The overarching vision of RFTA is to “pursue excellence and innovation in providing preferred transportation choices that connect and support vibrant communities.” The mission of the organization is to “connect [the] Region with Transit and Trails.” The strategic plan outlines seven outcome areas that RFTA strives to achieve. Three outcomes: 1) accessibility and mobility, 2) sustainable workforce, and 3) environmental sustainability align with the statewide focus on mobility. Providing a safe environment for customers, workforce, and the public relates to the safety goals at the State level. Finally, the strategic plan outcomes of financial sustainability, a satisfied customer base, and producing a high performing organization support the State asset management goal.

The RFTA strategic plan outlines the [Destination 2040: Our Future Ride on RFTA](#), a project list of regional improvements that align with the commitment to transit and trail access. The RFTA board—comprised of Pitkin County, Town of Basalt, City of Aspen, Town of Carbondale, Eagle County, and Glenwood Springs, City of New Castle, and Snowmass Village—meet monthly to carry out the strategic plan’s vision for the area. The project roadmap is a product of RFTA Board and staff voting to pose a 2.65 mill property tax levy option to regional voters in the eight member RFTA jurisdiction. The public supported the measure, adding \$9 million to the RFTA annual budget of \$42 million.⁵ The Destination 2040 roadmap displays project progress in a public facing manner, tracking projects that fit into three categories: Improvements for the Environment, Improvements for Reducing Congestion and Improving Mobility, and Improvements for Safety. The resource acts as a fact sheet for each project category that outlines the progress of appropriate initiatives through the funding, planning, purchase, and delivery phases.

First and Last Mile Mobility Implementation

Along with the initiatives set out by the CAP, RFTA commits to innovative ways to provide multimodal options that integrate with its expanding transit fleet. [WE-cycle](#), the Roaring Fork Valley’s bikeshare program, partners with RFTA on last mile solutions. Established in 2013, the 100-bicycle, 13 station system is a model for rural communities using transit and looking to further develop multimodal options. WE-cycle acts as the regional advocate and planner for local bikeshare, operating the service throughout the region and leading relevant technology implementation and initiatives. The program

² U.S. Census Bureau, [Pitkin County, Colorado](#)

³ U.S. Census Bureau, [Eagle County, Colorado](#)

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, [Garfield County, Colorado](#)

⁵ Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, [2019 Strategic Plan](#)

provides free access to as many rides a user may need, with the caveat that rides exceeding 30 minutes may be issued a late fee between \$0.50 and \$5.00.

Public Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration

RFTA prioritizes involving every possible affected population into the implementation phase of a given project or program. Communication with potentially affected stakeholders allows for informed outcomes. The strategic goals of “ensuring that the community members are given the opportunity to participate in the transit planning process” and “ensuring that the issues and concerns of potentially affected interests are given consideration”, guide RFTA’s [Public Involvement Plan](#) (PIP).

To reach low-income, minority, community members who rely on public transit, and those who do not speak English as their primary language, RFTA identified the following communication mechanisms:

1. Programs and services provided in the community through committees, organizations, healthcare facilities, public health experts, representatives of low income, minority, and/or individual input from within the community.
2. Schools, clubs, and activities to reach youth;
3. Local senior centers or other organizations to reach seniors;
4. Churches, organizations, foreign language TV stations, and radio stations to reach non-English speaking residents; and
5. Social service agencies and entities.

The transit authority’s public engagement strategy informs all other public facing documents. Those strategies are subject to change, coinciding with the shifting demographic makeup of the Roaring Fork Valley and the discovery of new or improved communication outlets.

Next Steps

RFTA has several ongoing projects that demonstrate its commitment to connecting rural residents to better economic opportunity and quality of life. Current priorities include the extension of bus priority lanes and the expansion of transit service along the I-70 corridor. In addition, the RFTA fleet of 125 buses will continue to grow, with the integration of electric buses as well as accommodating ridership needs for community connection. Currently, the fleet includes eight electric buses, with ten more planned for 2025.

The Glenwood Springs Maintenance Facility (GMF) expansion, a \$72 million project, will allow RFTA to safely and reliably provide transit service at existing levels and serve member jurisdiction’s future growth. The \$17.9 million [27th Street Pedestrian Underpass Project](#), also in Glenwood Springs, will include drainage improvements and reconfiguration of the Rio Grande Trail. The multi-use trail spans 42 miles and connects several communities along its route. Roughly 75,000 non-motorized users access it annually. RFTA celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2023, continually growing and adapting along with the communities it serves. The Authority will continue to look to innovation and creative problem solving to propel its sustained success.

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Resources

[27th Street Pedestrian Underpass Project](#)
[CDOT State Highway Access Control Plan](#)
[CDOT Statewide Transportation Plan](#)
[City of Glenwood Springs Access Control Plan](#)
[City of Glenwood Springs Regional Transit Services](#)
[Destination 2040 Roadmap](#)
[Eagle County/Town of Basalt SH 82 Access Control Plan](#)
[Economic Benefits Provided by The Roaring Fork Transportation Authority](#)
[Glenwood Springs Comprehensive Plan](#)
[Intermountain 2045 Regional Transportation Plan](#)
[Move Glenwood Springs Multimodal Options for a Vibrant Economy Final Report](#)
[Pitkin County Aspen Access Control Plan](#)
[Regional-Bicycle-Pedestrian-and-Transit-Access-Plan-2015](#)
[RFTA Public Involvement Plan](#)
[RFTA Strategic Plan](#)
[Rio Grande Artway Masterplan](#)
[Roaring Fork Transportation Authority](#)
[Roaring Fork Valley Regional Bikeshare Plan](#)
[Colorado Statewide Transit Plan](#)
[Strategic Actions for the Colorado Statewide Plan](#)
[Town of Carbondale Access Control Plan](#)
[WE-cycle](#)