

ITE Western District 2013 Annual Meeting Presentation

Title: Educating School Children Near Light Rail At-Grade Crossings

Track A: Planning and Modeling Our Communities

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Abstract:

The West Rail Line (a 12.1 mile light rail transit corridor located between downtown Denver and the Jefferson County Government Center in Golden, Colorado) is currently under construction and scheduled to open in April, 2013. The 3.5 mile segment in Lakewood, Colorado between the Sheridan Boulevard and Oak Street stations includes nine at-grade crossings. Four schools that are considered by the local fire district as “high risk” schools for pedestrian related crashes are in close proximity to the West Rail Line. The imminent opening of the West Rail Line greatly compounds the concerns that the schools have expressed regarding the safety of school children biking and walking to school. The City of Lakewood has invested in the construction of significant pedestrian amenities in the area. These new facilities will greatly improve the safety of the children walking or biking to school, but only if combined with an essential educational piece so that students can safely use them. This paper will summarize the efforts by the City of Lakewood in partnership with RTD, Bicycle Colorado, West Metro Fire District, Jefferson County School District and the four affected schools to implement a Safe Routes to School Grant funded project with the primary goal of educating the children at these schools on how to safely walk and bike to school and particularly how to safely cross the new light rail at-grade crossings. The project includes a mock at-grade rail crossing, informational videos and hands on training with the individual children.

Educating School Children Near Light Rail At-Grade Crossings

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The Regional Transportation District (RTD) FasTracks Program (See Exhibit A) is a multi-billion dollar comprehensive transit expansion plan to build 122 miles of new commuter rail and light rail, 18 miles of bus rapid transit, 21,000 new parking spaces at light rail and bus stations, and enhance bus service for easy, convenient bus/rail connections across the eight-county district.

The West Rail Line (see Exhibit B) opened in April, 2011 and is the first completed rail line of the RTD FasTracks project. The line consists of 12.1 miles of light rail runs between downtown Denver and Golden which is west of Denver. Much of the West Rail Line runs through residential neighborhoods in the City of Lakewood. The 3.5 mile segment in Lakewood between the Sheridan Boulevard and Oak Street Stations (see Exhibit C) travels through mostly residential neighborhoods and includes 9 at-grade crossings (crossings where vehicles and pedestrians must stop and yield the right of way to trains when they are present). Trains run at 7.5 minute service intervals in both directions during peak times and at 15 to 30 minute intervals during non-peak times. As Exhibit C illustrates, there are four schools with elementary age children in this area that are in close proximity to the West Rail line. The City of Lakewood and RTD have invested in the construction of significant pedestrian amenities in the area. These new facilities will greatly improve the safety of children walking or biking to school, but only if combined with an essential education piece so that students can safely use them.

With education of school children in mind, the City of Lakewood applied for and was awarded a Safe Routes to School grant this year related to walking and biking to schools and safely crossing the light rail crossings near the schools. Colorado Safe Routes to School (SRTS) uses a comprehensive approach to make school routes safe for children when walking and bicycling to school. The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) administers Colorado's SRTS program. In Colorado, funds are distributed to develop programs for K-8 grades. The SRTS Advisory Committee includes educators, parents, bicyclists, pedestrians, law enforcement, and transportation planners. School districts, schools, cities, counties, state entities and tribal entities are eligible to apply.

The City of Lakewood SRTS Program was a collaborative effort by the City of Lakewood in partnership with the RTD, Bicycle Colorado, Operation Lifesaver, West Metro Fire District, Jefferson County school district and the four affected schools. The goal of the program was to educate elementary age children in on how to safely walk and bike to school. In addition, we emphasized teaching the children how to be safe around light rail and how to safely cross the new light rail at-grade crossings near their schools.

There were three main focuses of the education campaign. First, we wanted to teach the kids general best practices for walking and biking safely to and from school. Second, we want to drill in the message that Tracks are for Trains and not for kids. In other words, don't play on or near the light rail tracks because this is a very dangerous space and only cross the tracks at designated crossing locations. Finally, we want to educate the children on how to safely cross the light rail at the designated light rail crossings.

Bicycle Colorado helped us with our efforts to teach the kids general best practices for walking and biking safely to and from school. Bicycle Colorado is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building a bicycle friendly Colorado. They have extensive experience with bicycle and walking encouragement and education programs for schools.

The remaining portion of the SRTS program was dedicated to educating children about light rail safety. The efforts started in the fall of 2012 when we held "Safety Road Shows" at each of the four schools. The Safety Road Shows consisted of a day of fun educational activities for the elementary school children. The children were brought out, one grade at a time, and split into groups. The groups were then rotated through several education stations. Operation Lifesaver, a nonprofit organization that provides public education programs to prevent collisions, injuries and fatalities on and around railroad tracks, had a station where they taught the children about the dangers of crossing or playing on or near the railroad tracks. West Metro Fire District had a station where they taught the kids to always wear a helmet when riding a bicycle and how to properly fit bicycle helmets. Another station was set up to allow the children to give feedback in the form of drawings on poster-boards. But the star of the Safety Road Shows was a mock crossing that RTD constructed (see Exhibit D). The mock crossing allowed the school children the opportunity to see and experience what it is like to cross the rail tracks at an at-grade crossing.

The West Line opened in April, 2013 and we felt it was important to have a refresher to remind the children of the safety training done in the spring prior to the opening. A five minute Safety Video was created to further stress the importance of safety around the light rail. The catch phrase of the video was “Stay Safe, Stay Aware and Stay Alive” and following messages were emphasized in the video:

- Light Rail Trains are heavy, fast and cannot stop easily
- Trains come in both directions so look both ways
- Cross at designated crossing areas
- Never play near the tracks or walk on or alongside the tracks
- Do not play with or listen to electronic devices near the tracks
- Overhead wires are electrified and very dangerous

In addition, the video had a segment showing the children how to safely board and exit the train. A Spanish and English version of the video was created because some of the impacted schools have a large population of children and parents that speak Spanish as their primary language. The video was shown to all of the children prior to opening day of the West Line. Copies of the video were given to the Jefferson County School District, RTD and Bicycle Colorado organizations and it was posted on the city of Lakewood’s website at the following address:

<http://www.lakewood.org/SafetyVideos/>

Parents were encouraged to watch the video so they could also be aware of best safety practices near light rail and continue to stress its importance to the school children.

The program was very successful and greatly appreciated by the Schools, students and parents. In addition, we felt it was important to leverage the tools created for this program to help educate children at other schools near or adjacent to Light Rail in the Denver Metropolitan area. With this in mind, the mock rail and crossing and Safety Video was used to help educate children at other schools located near the West Rail Line and will be used in the future to educate children at schools located near future FasTracks light rail corridors.

Exhibit A:



PROGRESS MAP



Exhibit B:

WEST RAIL LINE

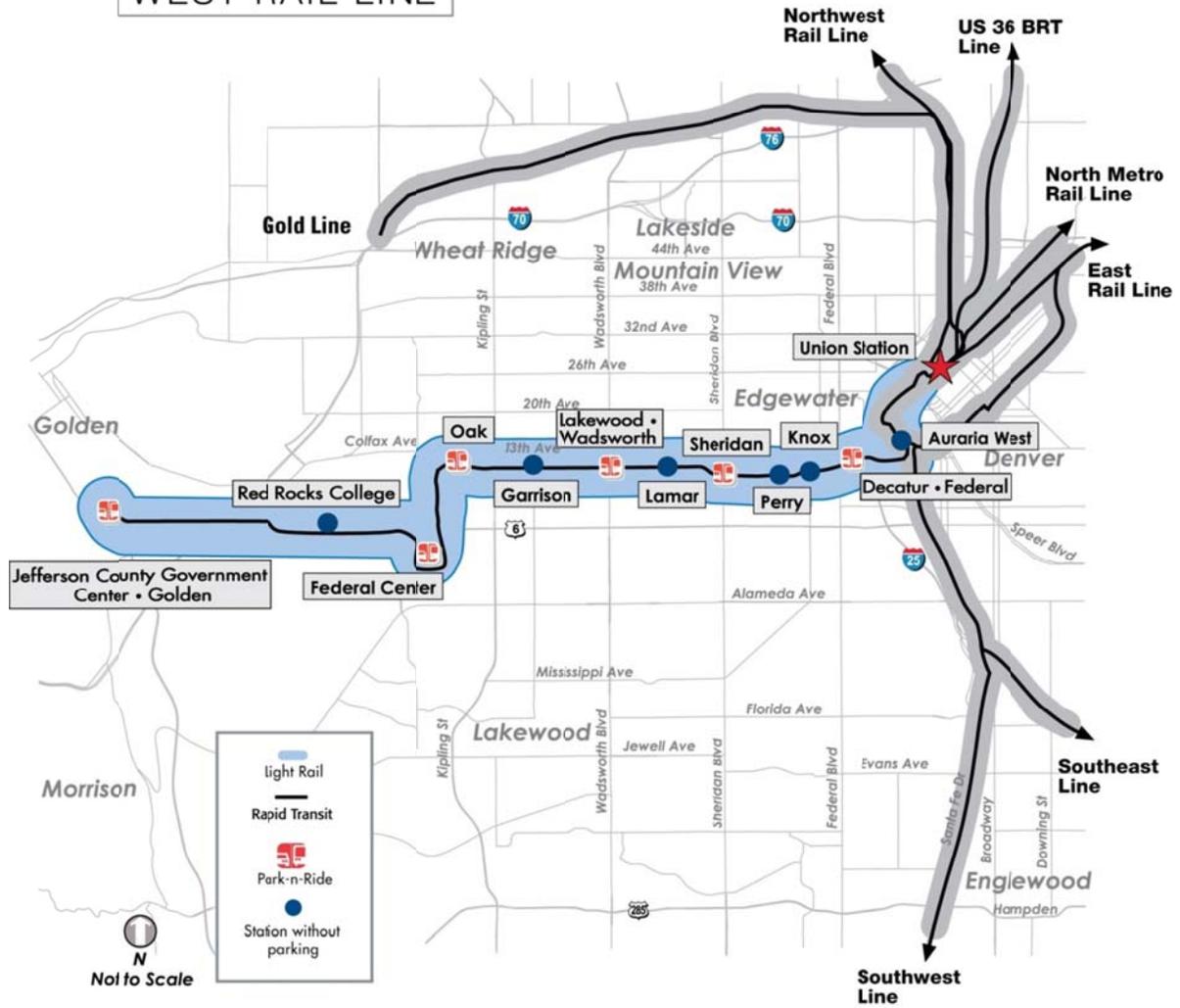


Exhibit C:

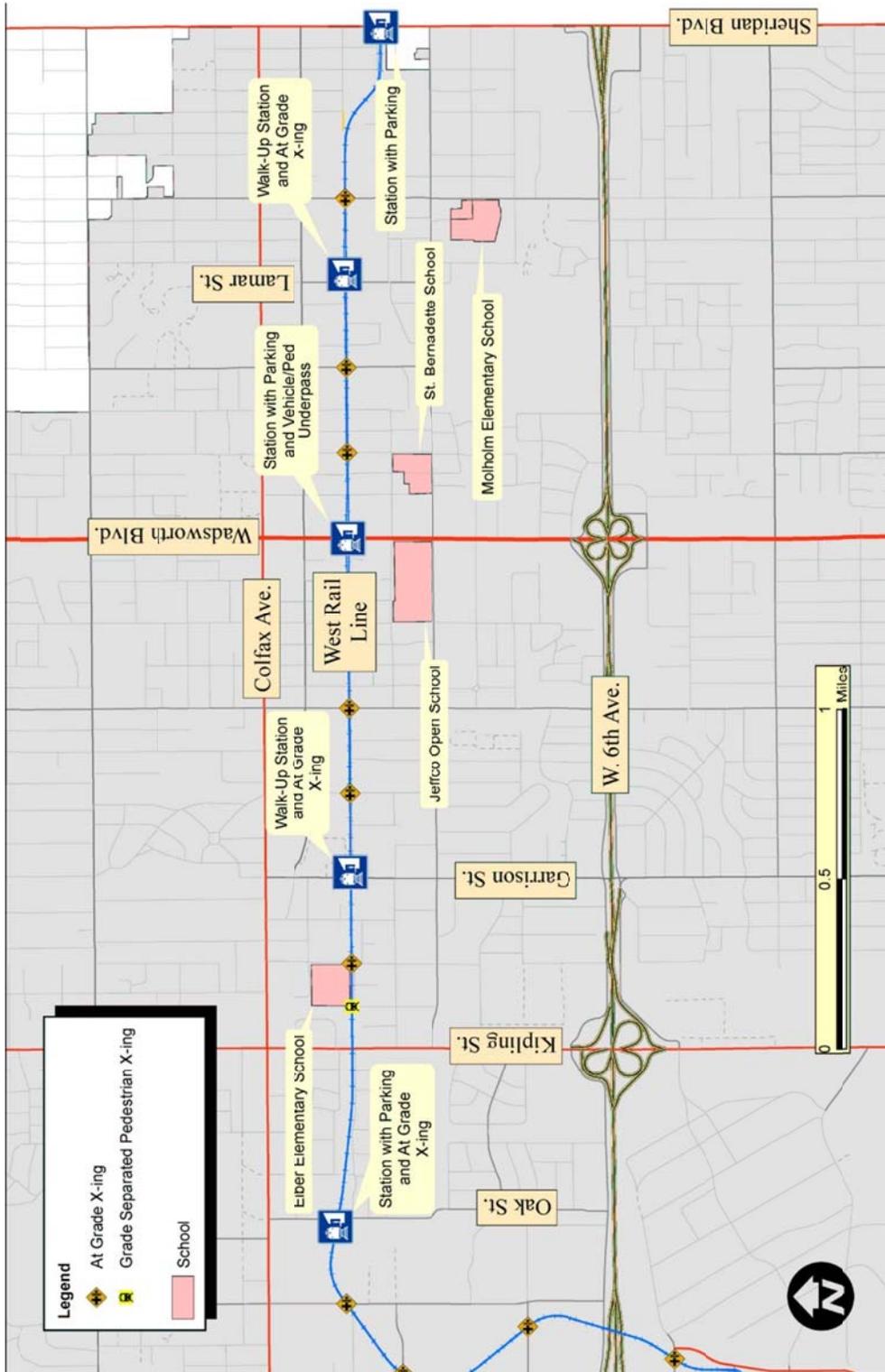


Exhibit D:

