

## Neoliberalism and the Splintering of City-Regionalism: The Case of Denver's Regional Transit Agency in Times of COVID-19 Urban Austerity

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**Abstract:** Public transit service provision is fraught with contradictions and tensions, which today tend to converge around the city-regional scale of planning and governance. The promise of public transit is to promote economic development and improve regional accessibility, mobility, equity, and sustainability. However, these priorities can often conflict with each other, resulting in the splintering of the corresponding city-regional planning and governance structures set up to finance and deliver major transit infrastructure projects. Drawing upon a case study of transit-led city-regionalism in Denver, Colorado, USA, this article explores how the tensions and contradictions embedded within regional public transit service planning are exposed and exacerbated during times of financial austerity, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines how the neoliberal goals of promoting transit-oriented redevelopment in Denver alongside expanding service to Denver's wealthier suburbs clash with the pandemic-induced expediency of targeting transit service for front-line workers and transit-dependent populations in core urban neighborhoods. The article demonstrates that in times of COVID-19-induced urban austerity the entrepreneurial city-regional approach to infrastructure provision originally developed for the FasTracks expansion program is increasingly at odds with regional objectives to use mass transit to foster equity and transport justice.

**Key Words:** Neoliberalism, City-Regionalism, Transit Planning, Regional Equity

## **Introduction**

In the USA, public transit provision across cities and metropolitan regions is often characterized as a panacea, where it can not only improve accessibility and promote economic development, but also can promote regional equity, reduce congestion, limit sprawl, help lower greenhouse gas emissions, and improve air quality (APTA, 2022). However, while each of these goals may be stated benefits of public transit, there also exist tensions between them, which in turn materialize around the corresponding city-regional planning and governance structures set up to deliver these goals. The type of transit service that fosters urban economic development (e.g., redevelopment of downtowns and inner-city neighborhoods) may not be the same type of service that improves regional equity (e.g., opening up suburbs to low-income households, improving regional accessibility to local labor markets, etc.). This article explores that tension, asking how the neoliberal governance structures of city-regional transit systems have been impacted by societal crises related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so it contributes to the literature on city-regionalism by demonstrating ways in which city-regional alliances around the provision of infrastructure and urban economic development can be pressured, and potentially undone, by fiscal crisis. Along the way it showcases one way in which neoliberal hegemony can be resisted through alternative fiscal approaches rooted in more socially and environmentally just territorial rationalities.

Across metropolitan areas and regions in the USA, tensions around collective provision and consumption (e.g., of mass transit) often assume a territorial-political form, especially when the fiscal costs and benefits of extending public services are unevenly distributed between cities, suburbs, and other local political jurisdictions (Cox & Jonas, 1993). What is often at issue in these situations are the transit needs and spatial mobility interests of diverse social groupings differentiated not just by location but also by class, race, age, gender and/or ethnicity. Notably,

low-income inner-city populations dependent upon transit to reach remote workplace destinations are more likely to be bus riders (Taylor & Morris, 2015). They are also more likely to have commutes that do not follow the spatial and temporal patterns of transit that fosters economic development, such as express rush hour bus routes connecting suburban workers to their downtown jobs. In a similar vein, different groupings of transit riders need different types of services, and what helps one transit-dependent social grouping (e.g. the elderly and retired) may come at the expense of another (e.g. front-line workers) (Grengs, 2005; Taylor & Morris, 2015). Transit agencies are thus continuously faced with the dilemma of what social interest groupings should be prioritized, and where, mindful that efforts to privilege one grouping over another could potentially exacerbate existing territorial-political tensions across a metropolitan area or region.

The socio-territorial dilemmas facing transit providers are further exacerbated under neoliberalism insofar as urban managers and regional transportation agencies tend to favor entrepreneurial approaches to local revenue generation, planning and governance, thereby prioritizing urban politics and governance structures that facilitate economic development and capital accumulation at the expense of social welfare and redistribution (Harvey, 1989). In the USA, neoliberalism, fiscal federalism and austerity have contrived to reduce or withdraw altogether federal funding for cities and other public agencies, making these agencies more reliant upon local taxes along with other novel revenue structures for financing new and improved social and physical infrastructures (Hackworth, 2011; Hall & Jonas, 2014; Peck, 2014). As cities and counties compete with each other for capital and investment, many have turned towards multi-city-regional approaches to promoting economic development, and attracting inward investment (Wachsmuth, 2017). In this context, regional public transit serves

not only as a mechanism for facilitating city-regional collaboration but also for securing necessary voter approval for new taxes and other local funding sources needed to leverage inward investment and equity finance capital from global markets (Jonas et al., 2019). However, such efforts to use infrastructure investments to achieve city-regional economic development objectives often come at the expense of other regional societal goals, such as equity, social justice and sustainability, contributing to political tensions of a territorial character.

Although city-regional collaboration appears to mark a return to a more centralized and integrated system of collective infrastructure provision, which became a hallmark of metropolitan planning and development in the USA in the mid-Twentieth Century, the forces of neoliberalism, privatization, globalization and infrastructure financialization have today combined to undermine and render increasingly problematic the ideal of the territorially integrated metropolis (or city-region) and its constituent networks of infrastructure (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Given the prevalence of metropolitan political fragmentation in the USA, one concrete indicator of what Graham and Marvin (op. cit.) refer to as “splintering urbanism” is growing political tensions around efforts to separate functionally and/or territorially those institutional structures devoted to promoting urban development and securing inward investment (e.g. expansion of regional transit infrastructure) from the corresponding institutions of planning and social provision that promote regional equity (e.g. rezoning cities and suburbs for affordable low income housing) (Jonas et al., 2010). The net effect of these political struggles is often a transit system which continues to function primarily as a tool for urban economic development and capital accumulation and only secondarily as a means to promote regional equity and provide social benefits for low income and minority populations. However, little is known about

the precise alignment of transit-dependent interests and political forces underpinning societal tendencies towards greater or, correspondingly, lesser examples of “splintering urbanism”.

A case in point relates to the recent history of regional transit provision in the USA in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has negatively impacted ridership and budgets, forcing transit agencies in many cities and regions to choose which services to cut and which services to preserve (Minor, 2021c). Pandemic-induced urban austerity has exacerbated already existing tensions between different social groupings of riders and the corresponding territorial structures of transit provision set up to promote regional equity and sustainability (see, e.g., Boschmann, 2024). Regional transit agencies have been forced to choose between providing, on the one hand, a minimum level of service for high ridership inner-city populations dependent on transit or, on the other, a minimum level of service for the lower ridership suburban populations who contributed, via votes and taxes, in large measure to fund and finance the regional transit system in question.

This article explores these newly emergent territorial-political tensions and contradictions around transit provision in the USA, using metropolitan Denver (Metro Denver) and its Regional Transportation District (RTD) as a case study. The case study reveals that the city-regional approach originally used to facilitate RTD’s efforts to expand regional transit through the construction of the FasTracks light and commuter rail system across six counties is splintering and fragmenting in the face of combined fiscal, economic and social pressures arising from the COVID pandemic. We posit that such splintering internalizes certain socio-territorial contradictions contained within the neoliberal funding and financing arrangements used to deliver the FasTracks rail transit expansion program as was originally approved by Metro Denver region voters in 2004. Specifically, it argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced

RTD to choose between providing rail and express bus service for suburban “choice” residents and (non-express) bus service for transit-dependent and front-line urban workers, thus leading to a fragmentation of the territorial political interests sustaining regional collaboration. In doing so, the article contributes to our understanding of how different “spaces of urban politics” (Ward et al., 2018) are implicated in city-regional approaches to infrastructure development under neoliberalism, namely, those that relate to entrepreneurial urban economic development, on the one hand, and the use of regional mass transit to foster equity and transport justice, on the other. Further, it shows how a collaborative model of city-regionalism can be undermined when urban economic development is no longer the priority of the transit agency, such as in times of fiscal austerity and pandemic.

The article is structured as follows. First, it reviews recent arguments about the impacts of neoliberalism on regional transit planning and financing, and examines the different logics – economic, social and environmental – driving forward emerging city-regional forms of urban governance and planning. Following that, the Denver case study is introduced. The development and goals of RTD’s FasTracks program are reviewed and situated within broader ideas of entrepreneurial urban governance, city-regionalism, and neoliberalism. Then RTD’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic is explored within the context of transport justice. Evidence of a further fragmentation and splintering of member socio-spatial polities in the city-regional alliance that supported the FasTracks program is then provided. The article concludes with a discussion of the connections that this case study has to the broader literature on city-regionalism and new spaces of urban politics.

### **Neoliberalism, City-Regionalism and Competing Goals of Transit Planning and Provision**

Since the 1970s, there has been a shift in urban governance in advanced capitalist countries, such as the United States, with the focus moving from regulating and socially redistributing the proceeds of capitalist growth to facilitating capital accumulation for its own sake (Harvey, 1989). Beginning in the 1970s and continuing through much of the 1980s, the neoliberal agenda in the USA focused on the removal of regulations, the privatization of the public sector and the rise of fiscal federalism. This stage of neoliberalism has been characterized as ‘roll-back’ neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002), which later in the 1990s morphed into a ‘roll out’ (Peck & Tickell, 2002) phase manifested in the creation of institutions and state norms, which sought to activate new structures and spaces of neoliberal planning and urban governance. Faced with cuts in federal funding, cities have introduced new institutional arrangements designed to promote growth and compete for jobs and attract international finance for capital investment in infrastructure (Jessop et al., 2005; Kirkpatrick & Smith, 2011).

In the USA, the neoliberal turn in urban governance overlays and reinforces an existing territorial-political geography characterized by fragmented units of local government and attendant problems of metropolitan fiscal disparity, which feed into conflicts around how urban growth is locally funded and serviced (e.g. via collective provision of infrastructure and education) (Cox & Jonas, 1993). Efforts to overcome metropolitan political fragmentation have evolved under neoliberalism to take the form of various city-regional approaches undertaken at different spatial scales, ranging from metropolitan city-regionalism (central city and its suburbs) to multi-city regionalism (multiple metropolitan areas) to megaregionalism (larger scale regions of connected metropolitan areas) (Jonas et al., 2014; Wachsmuth, 2017). Most recently, city-regionalism has become a favored approach for urbanized areas to compete for infrastructural investments and international finance. In this approach, cities and suburbs within metropolitan



areas or multiple metropolitan areas within larger urban regions work together on initiatives to promote economic development within the region (Wachsmuth, 2017).

In practice, such collaborative city-regional models of urban entrepreneurialism often prioritize public-private partnerships (PPPs), regional spatial planning, and other similar neoliberal institutional structures and spaces mainly designed to draw investment into large-scale urban development projects and thereby enhance local fiscal capacities and resources (Harvey, 1989; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Moreover, by pooling their resources, metropolitan polities can improve the chances that a prospective global investor will locate in the region or that a major regional infrastructure project attracts necessary financing, potentially benefiting all of the participating cities and local jurisdictions (Wachsmuth, 2017). However, scholars and policy advocates alike argue that economic development alone is often not enough to sustain a collaborative city-regional approach to contemporary urban economic, environmental and social challenges (Katz & Bradley, 2013). Despite its much-touted benefits, city-regional collaboration is laden with political tension, necessitating compromise among member cities and civic actors having different and competing local interests in, respectively, urban economic development and collective social provision (Jonas, 2013). Often at issue is the extent to which the funding and delivery of urban economic development is spatially coupled with other collective provision investments, such as transportation, education and similar collectively consumed services (Jonas et al., 2010).

A particular source of tension associated with this neoliberal framing of city-regional planning and governance centers around the financing of transportation projects, which fail to prioritise increased accessibility across diverse population groupings and locations; instead, they often focus on increasing private property values at select locations – mainly along urban transit

corridors - through public infrastructure investment (King & Fischer, 2016). Examples of this type of fiscally motivated spatial planning are not new to the US; the planning and development of streetcar suburbs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are noteworthy examples (op. cit.). Following the rediscovery of mass transit in US cities in the late twentieth century, contemporary examples include light rail (Olesen, 2020) and subways (Farmer, 2011); albeit the context is now very different with neoliberal approaches to transit planning, such as zoning for transit-oriented development (TOD), often rolled out alongside, and sometimes in tension with, other city-regional objectives, such as reduction of carbon emissions, smart growth and regional sustainability and equity. This means that the aspirations and outcomes of city-regional transit planning often diverge in practice, resulting not in increased equity and accessibility, but instead increasing land values, the attraction of finance capital, and urban economic development (Culver, 2017; Farmer, 2011; Olesen, 2020).

Critics of a neoliberal approach to transit planning posit that, by emphasizing capital accumulation, regional transit serves to exacerbate existing socio-territorial inequalities, rather than alleviate them (Culver, 2017; Farmer, 2011; Olesen, 2020). Culver (2017) identifies four goals of neoliberal transit planning in need of further critical analysis, namely, its role in: (1) improving city image, (2) promoting economic development, (3) creating livable urbanity, and (4) improving transit. Farmer (2011) adds to these by highlighting how transit planning seeks to connect cities to global airports, thereby connecting global urban centers of capital. In this article we use Culver's and Farmer's characteristics of neoliberal transit governance as a framework for empirical analysis of Denver RTD's transit planning and development. Through this framework transit projects can be examined to determine whether or not they can be considered as neoliberal in nature. In doing so, we are able not only to identify aspects of neoliberalism in Denver RTD's

planning and goals, but also interrogate ways in which the pandemic and associated budget cuts upended those goals, leading to friction in the city-regional alliance that RTD serves.

Under neoliberal urbanism, transit planning in the USA and many other countries besides has become an integral component of a carefully planned imaginary of the city – especially that of the “sustainable” or “smart” city (Dierwechter, 2013; Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2000; Olesen, 2020). In this scenario, the commodity of public transit is fetishized so that its value is not in its use, but rather in its ability to make the city desirable to investors, highly paid professionals, and skilled workers. In the neoliberal age of entrepreneurial governance, when cities must compete with each other for mobile capital, a highly developed transit system can work to make a city seem worldly, giving it an edge in place competition (Paget-Seekins, 2015).

Nevertheless, transit systems must also cater to different social groupings and classes distributed throughout a city-region, which creates opportunities for different logics and discourses – for instance, those of equity and social justice - to enter the political debate about transit planning. Take, for example, the decision to invest in bus transit versus light and commuter rail. Despite the importance of the bus as a part of a city’s transportation network, much of the focus of planning is not on improving bus travel to help low-income people by improving accessibility and social justice. Instead, transit planning today often focuses on regional light rail and commuter rail projects, which serve higher income and suburban dwellers (Grengs 2005). These projects are especially attractive for transit planners interested in matters of regional equity as they can be effective in facilitating the creation of territorial political coalitions and business alliances that are increasingly necessary to fund and pass legislation for project funding and finance (Jonas, 2013). Thus, a goal of “equity” can be deployed to favor different constituencies depending on social and spatial context. In order for such coalitions to be

successful, they strive to mobilize across boundaries of class, social grouping and territory (local political jurisdictions). Large-scale infrastructure projects, such as mass transit systems, extending across the city-region can serve as effective catalysts for building such support. This enables city-regional growth coalitions to lobby local politicians and tap state, national and even global capital necessary to finance regional public infrastructure projects (Jonas et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, large-scale transit projects have been criticized by scholars as being intended to improve transit only for the wealthy and position cities in a way that they can attract more wealthy residents (Culver, 2017; Farmer, 2011; King & Fischer, 2016; Olesen, 2020). These types of projects have long been characterized as serving high income, predominantly White, ‘choice’ riders, in lieu of lower-income riders (Lu, 2018). Other scholars add that these large-scale projects also often come at the expense of local bus routes that serve poor and socially deprived districts and neighborhoods (Grengs, 2005). In these circumstances, the expanded focus of transit-driven economic development often gets in the way of its social justice goals of improving access for the poorest of the poor (Grengs, 2005; Taylor & Morris, 2015). As Dierwechter (2013, p. 145) argues, “relatively scarce public transit investments could be directed invariably to edifying those economic centers populated disproportionately (though not exclusively) by social elites who already enjoy multiple mobility choices”.

The onset of the COVID pandemic had devastating impacts on public transit systems in the US and around the world. Public transit ridership plummeted as quarantines and lockdowns curtailed mobility. In response to severely declining ridership, operator shortages, and financial constraints, most transit agencies were forced to alter their services. Many transit frequencies were reduced across different parts of cities while they were increased in other areas connecting to hospitals and other essential services. Analysis of transit service changes in major North

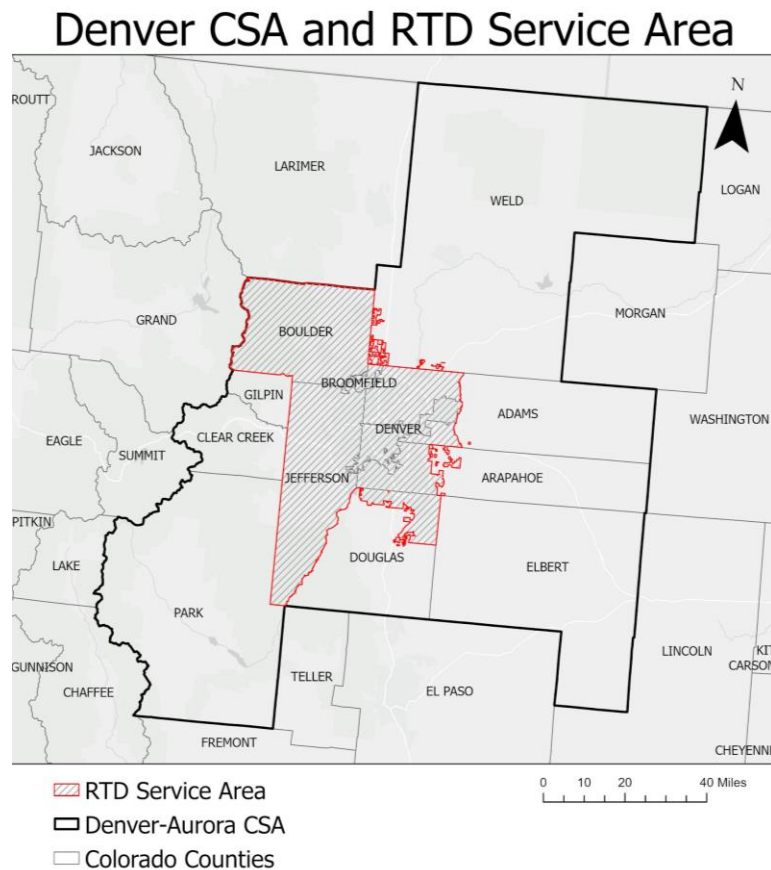
American cities in 2020 reveals a mixed pattern concerning the degree to which low-income or otherwise vulnerable areas were affected. While some transit agencies (e.g., Toronto, Montreal) made disproportionately more service cuts in areas with higher concentrations of vulnerable groups, other transit agencies (e.g., San Francisco, Denver, Atlanta, Portland) made fewer cuts and more additions in services passing through areas with higher concentrations of vulnerable groups. Other agencies (e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Miami) enacted service cuts and additions nearly equally across areas (DeWeese et al., 2020). It is unclear how these transit agencies will rebound from the effects of the pandemic given depressed ridership that has not returned to pre-COVID levels and mounting financial losses that place more strain on already-taxed systems (Levitz, 2023). The pressure to return to more neoliberal policies will likely increase.

### **Denver RTD Fastracks Program: Activating Transit Planning as Neoliberal City-Regionalism**

RTD, particularly its 2004 FasTracks expansion program, is emblematic of neoliberal transit planning trends that came to dominate city-regional planning, smart growth and governance in US cities and regions in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Dierwechter, 2013). The political ingredients for such trends were forged around the construction of new coalitions and alliances between hitherto antagonistic territorial interests, including business-led downtown redevelopment coalitions, regional environmental organizations, wealthy suburban voters, regional planners, and community organizations based in low-income neighborhoods. The recent history of city-regional transit planning in Denver represents a case in point. In this section, a brief history of RTD's FasTracks program is provided, which highlights the key role that city-regional collaboration played in its successful adoption (for details, see Jonas et al.,

2014). Subsequently, Culver's (2017) and Farmer's (2011) key features of neoliberal transit planning are used to highlight the ways that RTD and the FasTracks program internalize some of the tensions and contradictions of the neoliberal paradigm of transit planning.

Denver is a large metropolitan area in the American Southwest, located in the State of Colorado. The metropolitan area, measured as the combined statistical area (CSA) including the cities of Boulder and Aurora has a population of 3.65 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The CSA is composed of twelve counties along the Front Range region of the Rockies (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. RTD service area and counties included in the Denver-Aurora CSA.*

The metropolitan area's transit agency is the Denver RTD. The RTD service area covers eight of the CSA counties and serves 3.08 million people over an area of 2342 square miles (see Figure 1). Denver RTD is one of the largest transit agencies in the United States, consistently ranking in the Top 20 in terms of ridership (APTA, 2019). The system had over 52 million passenger boardings in 2020 (RTD, 2021). As of 2021 the system features over 9500 bus stops and 114 miles of rail, much of which was built as part of the system's FasTracks expansion in the early 2000s (RTD, 2021).

The FasTracks program, approved by voters in 2004, promised an extension of 122 miles of light/commuter rail and 18 miles of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), while 78 rail stations would accompany the rail lines including a refurbished Union Station to serve as the intermodal hub of the system. Additionally, the bus network was to be enhanced to provide bus rail connections. A total of 96 park and ride facilities with 36,000 parking spaces were also included in the plan. A final feature of the plan was enhanced suburb-to-suburb bus connections (RTD, 2018). The program was paid for by a 0.4% sales tax increase in the local jurisdictions located in the RTD service area.

FasTracks was approved thanks, in part, to an active campaign of city-regional coalition-building involving Metro Denver's business and civic leaders working with local officials and mayors from Denver and the seven surrounding counties and constituent local jurisdictions (Jonas et al., 2014). In particular, the Metro Mayors Caucus, an organization that includes the mayors of Denver and nearby cities such as Boulder, Lakewood, and Aurora, played an important role in smoothing territorial differences and conflicts to rally support for FasTracks. Then Denver mayor John Hickenlooper, who became an ardent advocate of city-regional

collaboration, was known for stating “The days of Denver making decisions for its own benefit without the suburbs are over” (Katz & Bradley, 2013, p. 58).

FasTracks was one of the first tests of Hickenlooper’s Denver-focused regional approach. The southeast portion of the region already had rail service, so while local votes were needed, residents in that area would not be getting as much out of the proposed expansion as, say, commuters in less well-serviced cities. Instead, necessary electoral support was achieved by focusing on the economic benefits that would come to the entire region via the expansion. Randy Pye, former mayor of Centennial, a southeastern suburb of Denver, commented on this regional approach: “We talked a lot about jobs, so the construction industry got behind this big time. Businesses were talking to their employees about how important this was to the economy of the region” (Katz & Bradley, 2013, p. 58). By highlighting the economic impacts that FasTracks would have on the entire region, the Metro Mayors Caucus was able to galvanize support from voters for the project.

This represents a key departure from traditional approaches of urban entrepreneurialism at that time, where it was typical of cities to compete for sparse federal (and private) funding. This regional approach also represented a departure from prior transit funding attempts that had been hampered by regional tensions from racial and class divisions as well as sprawling suburban development (Goetz, 2013). In the case of FasTracks, the political coalition of the Metro Mayors Caucus worked to smooth tensions and organize wealthy suburbanite support around infrastructure investment that would, it was suggested, improve the regional economy (Jonas et al., 2014).

Shortly after the passage of FasTracks, the Great Recession of 2007-8 struck the US economy. This, combined with overly optimistic budgeting on the part of RTD resulted in a need



for a new financing approach for FasTracks. As a result, RTD engaged in rolling out a new innovative form of public-private partnership (PPP or P3). The Eagle P3 was a partnership convened and orchestrated not so much at the regional scale but instead on a global scale (Jonas et al., 2019). Where most prior PPPs had existed with local private entities, the Eagle P3 leveraged international finance to fund transit expansion. The program resulted in nearly \$1.5 billion in additional funds. As such, the prospect of securing international financing for the Eagle P3 project exemplifies a form of “internationally orchestrated city regionalism” (Jonas, 2013).

Eagle P3 was responsible for funding the A line, which featured 23 miles of commuter rail connecting downtown to the Denver International Airport (DIA). The 11-mile commuter rail G Line was funded through Eagle P3 and opened in 2019. The first 5.7 miles of the B line commuter rail from downtown Denver to Westminster was also completed as part of the Eagle P3 project. Most of the other rail elements of the FasTracks plan, including the W line to Lakewood, the R line through Aurora, and the N line to Thornton opened between 2013 and 2021. The remaining gap in completing FasTracks is the 35 miles of the B line connecting Longmont and Boulder to Denver via commuter rail which faces an uncertain future because of high capital costs and limited funding available to complete this segment (*Eagle P3 Project*, n.d.).



The following sections examine the data and methods used in this analysis, characterize RTD's 2004 FasTracks expansion as a paragon of neoliberal transit planning using Culver's (2017) and Farmer's (2011) frameworks, and demonstrate how the contradictory logics underpinning the system expansion led to the fragmentation of the city-regional coalition built around FasTracks when the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

## **Data and Methods**

The data for this article include RTD transit planning documents, RTD reports, articles from Denver-based newspapers, and academic publications related to RTD and their 2004 expansion. RTD planning documents, particularly those related to the planning of the 2004 FasTracks expansion, are used to interrogate RTD's stated goals for the expansion. RTD reports on FasTracks progress are used to understand RTD's strategic priorities. News stories and academic works are used as sources for quotes from politicians, developers, and transit planners that help to characterize the decision making around RTD's expansion and goal setting. In addition, the researchers have participated in several public engagement events associated with the delivery of the FasTracks program and produced two commissioned research reports, which critically evaluated the program's original objectives, governance structures and outcomes.

Through discourse and transit planning analysis, FasTracks and RTD's goals and planning are put into a conceptual framework that interrogates the economic, environmental and social assumptions and logics underpinning the program as it was initially rolled out. Using this framework, RTD and FasTracks' pre-COVID priorities are characterized as being underpinned primarily by neoliberal understandings of the purpose of public transit. Then, RTD's COVID-forced service cuts and attendant attempts to refocus on questions of social equity are

characterized as being in conflict with neoliberal understandings of public transit. By placing RTD planning documents within this framework, the conflict between RTD FasTracks' goals and their COVID-19 service cuts are examined in a critical light.

### **Building a new city-regional transit partnership**

A city-regional partnership was necessary for RTD's 2004 FasTracks expansion to be approved by voters from the entire RTD region, a territory currently encompassing eight counties within the Denver-Aurora-Boulder CSA. The partnership was characterized, first and foremost, by neoliberal assumptions of what transit can and should do as a collectively consumed and provided good creating a wider choice of mobility options for consumers located throughout the Denver city-region. As such, the planning and framing of the RTD expansion can best be understood through a critical lens that explicitly draws attention to contradictions and tensions internal to competition-led collaborative models of city-regional transit provision. This section therefore uses Culver's (2017) and Farmer's (2011) five characteristics of neoliberal transit to demonstrate how the goals of the FasTracks expansion were originally shaped by neoliberal logics of transit provision. These logics were further emphasized by RTD's recent pre-COVID-19 goals. By 2020, RTD's goals had been organized into the categories of: 1) Balance transit needs w/ regional growth, 2) Increase transit mode share, 3) Improve transit options and choices, and 4) Improve sustainability and public health (*Quality of Life*, 2020). Table 1 outlines these goals and identifies the metrics used by RTD to measure them. Therefore, these goals are also examined within the conceptual framework alongside the planning and framing of RTD's FasTracks expansion. After this, we discuss RTD's goals as they relate to low income

populations. Then RTD’s revised goals during the pandemic are introduced and examined within the context of transport justice.

| Table 1. FasTracks Goals as Stated in 2020 <i>Quality of Life</i> Report |  |   |                                   |
|--|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Goal   | Description  | Metrics   | Low Income Populations Mentioned? |
| 1) Balance Transit Needs with Regional Growth                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RTD frames this goal around the growing population and job numbers in the Denver metropolitan region.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The amount of transit, in both service hours as well as total miles of different transit modes</li> <li>The number of housing and retail units that are built per year within a half mile of RTD light rail and BRT stations.</li> </ul> | No                                |
| 2) Increase Transit Mode Share   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framed as important to RTD because of the number of individuals that drive alone to work</li> <li>All four metrics mentioned in the Quality of Life report page detailing why this is important, are vehicle related.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time spent in congestion,</li> <li>Vehicle Miles Traveled</li> <li>Number of vehicles purchased</li> </ul>   | No                                |
| 3) Improve Transit Options and Choices                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving transit options and choices is framed as being important due to the time drivers spend in congestion and the annual cost of congestion.</li> <li>Another common feature of this goal is the high frequency transit service area and the close proximity of park and ride facilities to most users.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comparing travel time by transit to travel time by car along key corridors with rapid transit</li> <li>RTD’s on time service percentage</li> <li>Park and ride use</li> <li>Number of transit boardings</li> </ul>                       | No.                               |
| 4) Improve Sustainability and Quality of Life                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framed around emissions from vehicle usage (Quality of Life 2020).</li> <li>Outlines greenhouse gas emissions and ozone emissions as the impetus for its importance.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to health facilities,</li> <li>Reduction in greenhouse gasses,</li> <li>Reduced vehicle crashes,</li> <li>Amount of affordable transit oriented</li> </ul>  | Yes                               |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
|  |  | development housing<br>(Quality of Life 2020). |  |
|--|--|--|--|

Source: adapted from FasTracks' Quality of Life Report (RTD, 2020)

### ***Improving city image***

Use of transit planning and development to improve the external image of a city has become a key feature of neoliberal urbanism and is often a 'soft power' deployed to raise the geopolitical profile of the host country or region (Culver, 2017; Farmer, 2011; Paget-Seekins, 2015). In this context, the goal of transit planning is to make the city, including its wider city-region, appear worldly, so that it can attract global flows of capital to grow economically. RTD's Eagle P3 is a prime example of this. The public private partnership leverages global finance to create investment in the physical landscape of the Denver Metro Region. The partnership is "an assemblage of global firms having a significant stake in the development of the metropolitan economy of Denver" (Goetz et al., 2016, p. 16). Additionally, some of the funding for the Eagle P3 project was from a loan from the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act of 1998. A key selection criterion for this loan was the extent to which the project could enhance the regional economy, in part through its ability to support international commerce (RTD, 2004).

### ***Economic development***

Culver (2017) highlights an emphasis on transit for economic development as a key feature of neoliberal transit planning. Under neoliberalism, transit is planned not to improve accessibility, but instead to facilitate consumer choice and economic growth. Transit

development thus serves as a catalyst for attracting mobile capital (Culver, 2017; King & Fischer, 2016; Olesen, 2020). A key feature of the city-regional partnership that facilitated the passage of FasTracks was a desire to improve economic development within the Denver region (Goetz et al., 2016). RTD stated that the program would create a “livable environment that will be attractive to business and economic development” (RTD, 2004, p. ES-11). This was of particular importance for getting suburban voters in the region to support the program.

Economic development continued to be a key goal of RTD’s up to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its *2020 Quality of Life* study RTD’s first goal, balancing transit needs with regional growth, demonstrates the role of neoliberalism in transit planning, as transit service is deemed necessary due to the increased number of jobs that the growing number of people need to reach (RTD, 2020). Transit is thus necessary to facilitate the continued growth of the economy (Culver, 2017).

### ***Liveable Urbanity***

The kind of livable urbanity that this type of transit planning advocates is akin to that of Richard Florida’s (2019) creative class thesis. In this characteristic of neoliberal transit planning, the purpose of transit is to help facilitate the creation of a dense yet livable urban environment, which can attract ‘creative class’ workers who are drawn to cities with vibrant downtown spaces (Culver, 2017). By promoting greater density and a mixture of land uses around transit stations, Transit Oriented Development (TOD) is a tool designed to physically enhance the urban environment to attract workers to the area and foster the urban density necessary to stimulate all kinds of creative activities. Yet despite the promise of affordable housing that comes with TOD, this approach to livable urbanity has also been linked to gentrification and attendant problems of housing (un)affordability and displacement (Culver, 2017).

TOD has been a key feature of Denver's development as the FasTracks program has grown. TOD was cited as an important way in which FasTracks could help to improve the economy by increasing property values (RTD, 2004). RTD also points to the ability of FasTracks to create a 'livable environment' that would help develop the region economically. As the FasTracks system was being built out, transit planners and enthusiasts involved in Denver's Transit Alliance rolled out a coordinated program of civic and public engagement, inviting local residents and transit users throughout the Denver city-region to envision different neighborhood TOD 'placemaking' scenarios based on best-practice examples from European cities, such as Amsterdam, regarded to be exemplars of sustainable urban living and creative placemaking. TOD is also emphasized in RTD's 2020 goals. The TOD component of its first goal, balancing transit needs with regional growth, reinforces the idea that transit infrastructure's usefulness is in its ability to improve the desirability of property, driving up property values for landowners (King & Fischer, 2016).

### ***Improved Transit***

Improving transit under the umbrella of neoliberalism and its underpinning philosophy of consumer 'choice' is typified by transit that is built not for low-income populations but instead for populations that can choose to drive or not drive if they so wish (Culver, 2017). This type of transit caters to those populations that are already car owners in the hopes that they will abandon their cars and use the transit instead. While this is an admirable goal, it often comes at the cost of transit that works well for people that cannot afford to own a car.

RTD boasts many of these features. First, FasTracks financed the development of 96 park and ride facilities with over 36,000 parking spaces (RTD, 2018). These facilities were intended to allow drivers to use transit for part of their trip. Additionally, a goal of FasTracks during its



planning was to increase transit mode share by encouraging drivers to use transit for some trips (RTD, 2004). Cars and car owners were still an emphasis for RTD in 2020. RTD's second goal of increasing mode share and third goal of improving transit options are influenced by neoliberal ideas of transit's purpose. While increasing transit mode share is an admirable goal, Culver (2017) notes, under the umbrella of neoliberalism, increasing transit mode share is often done with the car owning population in mind, not the population that cannot afford a car. The measurement of these goals does not include any mention of or measures specific to low-income populations that are most reliant upon transit (Taylor & Morris, 2015). Instead, the goal is measured by the degree to which RTD has facilitated better transit options for populations that have cars (e.g., the percent of riders that use the park and ride facilities). The neoliberal framework that supported FasTracks approval means that populations with the resources to afford cars are prioritized in the planning of transit services.

### ***Connection to the airport***

One of the goals of regional transit systems is to create more and better intermodal linkages to reduce automobile dependency and to enhance the interconnectivity of urban mobility hubs including central rail stations and airports. Rail connections to airports have also been embraced by urban economic development officials who increasingly see these connections as critical to global competitiveness. Farmer (2011) highlights the importance of these rail transit connections to airports as a key development strategy under neoliberalism. The airport connection serves to physically connect downtown centers of business to global flows of capital, attracting global finance to the city.

The University of Colorado A line was finished in 2016 and connects Denver's downtown Union Station to DIA, on the outskirts of Denver. One of the goals of the project was

regional economic development, specifically the development of an ‘aerotropolis’ which could attract global companies to Denver (Goetz et al., 2016; Goetz, 2020). The connection to the airport was intended to make the city-region more desirable for companies. “Denver joins this really elite group of regions that have that type of a connection between their airport and the central business district,” says Nate Currey, spokesman for RTD. “There’s fewer than 20 cities in the United States that have that” (Awad, 2016). The A line is seen by businesses, transit planners and economic development officials as the most successful feature of FasTracks because of its access to the airport and ability to bring in economic development (Goetz et al., 2016).

### ***RTD Low-Income Services and Goals***

Low-income populations are not typically included in neoliberal ideas of what transit should accomplish (Olesen, 2020). Despite this, the 71-page FasTracks Program Summary does include two mentions of transit improvements that are intended for low-income populations. First, they are mentioned as potential beneficiaries of FasTracks enhanced bus network initiatives (RTD, 2004). Additionally, low-income populations were mentioned as one of the communities likely to benefit from what is now known as the W line, connecting downtown Denver with suburbs to the west of the city (RTD, 2004). However, despite being mentioned in the 2004 program summary, these two projects are not linked to any of the 2020 *Quality of Life* goals. This lack of goals oriented towards low-income transit service is important as it highlights the degree to which transit service priorities shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RTD does have one goal related to low income populations in its 2020 *Quality of Life* report (RTD, 2020). The final goal, improving sustainability and quality of life, is the only section of the 113-page *Quality of Life* report which mentions low-income populations and is not

clearly located in neoliberal ideology. However, this low-income goal is specifically about building affordable housing, which while admirable, is not directly related to transit service. While other goals highlighted how transit service could be improved to draw more riders from the ranks of car drivers, the only low-income goal is limited to housing that can be built near transit. It is unknown if that form of transit provision provides the service that low-income people need.

### ***RTD Goals During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact transit ridership, RTD's operating budget also began to falter. As a result, it was necessary for RTD to make service cuts. The cuts were done with two priorities, which have been maintained as RTD has begun to add service back (Minor, 2021c). The first priority was maintaining access to key activity centers, such as hospitals and other medical facilities and employment clusters. The second priority was to maintain service in low income and minority areas where ridership has been high. These cuts represent a clear departure from RTD's prepandemic goals related to transit service, none of which were specifically related to transit service for low-income populations.

As a result, low income and minority groups were impacted less by the service cuts than the population as a whole. Low-income routes had a 13% smaller reduction in service compared to high income routes. Minority routes had a 29% smaller reduction than non-minority routes (Minor, 2021c). As services are added back, RTD will also be keeping low-income and minority populations as a priority, according to RTD's transit equity manager (Minor, 2021c). RTD pointed towards Title VI requirements in its report outlining the cuts. Title VI dictates that when major service cuts are made, RTD must evaluate whether the changes that are 'major' will have a

disproportionately negative impact on minority or low-income populations (cited in Minor 2021C ).

While the RTD priorities regarding transit service cuts are congruent with recent scholarship on theories of transport justice (Pereira et al., 2017), the prioritization of low-income and minority populations in RTD's COVID-induced service planning is in conflict with the neoliberal priorities of FasTracks. Most of FasTracks' 2004 and 2020 pre-pandemic goals are focused on providing transit for wealthy suburban car owners as a means to improve economic development in the city-region. However, cuts during the pandemic prioritize equity and transit service for low-income populations. This departure from the neoliberal oriented goals prior to the pandemic created conflict within the city-regionalism alliance that facilitated the passage and development of FasTracks which has manifested in the splintering of the city-regional alliance.

### **Splintering of the City-Regional Approach**

Neoliberal models of city-regional collaboration built around transit planning are inherently unstable and riddled with internal tensions, revealing the oftentimes fickle nature of the different urban spatial interests that sustain or fragment them. When speculating about the “politically fragile” regional smart growth and transit planning regime in Greater Seattle, Dierwechter (2013, p. 147) wrote that “[i]f transit-oriented regeneration stalls out, wealthy voters will sour on the strategic containment of a once “cheap” (i.e. subsidized) periphery without gains in livability, whether measured via mobility, amenities, leisure, or housing, etc. The spatial entente between the urban business and regional environmental communities would surely collapse.”

COVID-induced austerity has in fact exposed the fragility of the city-regional transit coalition constructed in Denver, where the conflicting goals of neoliberal transit provision (e.g. attracting global investment) and the equity-based COVID-19 service reductions have facilitated the splintering of the regional approach that helped to pass the FasTracks program which can be evidenced with three controversies that have occurred since 2020. First, the city council of Parker, a higher-income suburban jurisdiction located nearly 30 miles southeast of downtown Denver (Figure 4), endorsed legislation that would allow them to leave the RTD compact (Minor, 2021a). Second, Colorado Governor Jared Polis claimed that RTD needed “reform not more money” (Jimenez, 2021) and created an accountability task force for the transit agency (*RTD Will Collaborate with Independent Accountability Committee*, 2020). Third, the Colorado Department of Transportation withheld funding from RTD unless the agency agreed to further invest in and restore Flatiron Flyer BRT service between Denver and Boulder (Minor, 2021e).

# RTD Service Area Income

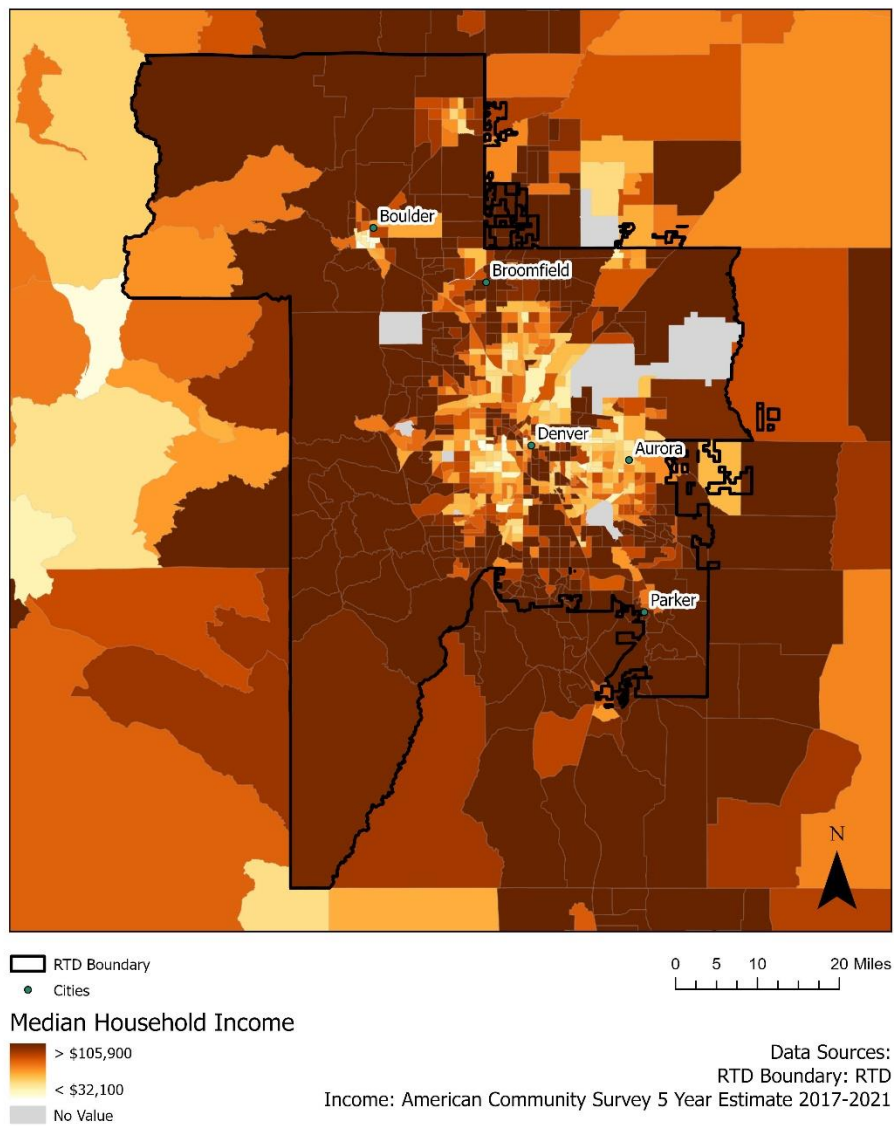


Figure 3: A map of income and cities of interest in the Denver Metropolitan region. Source: ACS 5 year estimate 2017 – 2021 <https://www.census.gov/data/developers/data-sets/acs-5year.html>

## 1. Parker and RTD

In February of 2021 the city council of the town of Parker endorsed legislation that would allow it to start the process of leaving RTD (Minor, 2021b). The impetus for the desire to leave came from what the council members view as a lack of return on investment from RTD (op. cit.).

The town, according to RTD, paid about \$11.5 million in sales tax to RTD. These taxes were the suburb's share of revenue from the FasTracks ballot initiative coupled with a prior RTD service area sales tax. Despite this, Parker only received \$3.4 million in equivalent service revenue, an amount confirmed by RTD's own records (Minor, 2021b).

The service consisted of two lines: a commuter bus line to Downtown Denver, and a local bus route. Services on the two lines were cut during COVID so that RTD could better cope with the financial fallout of the pandemic (Minor, 2021b). These service cuts exposed the conflicting priorities of RTD during the pandemic. The lines, in turn, illustrate the contradictory goals of transit planning under neoliberalism. Parker is nearly 30 miles from downtown Denver so the fact that half of the town's transit service is a commuter line to downtown exemplifies RTD's priority of moving suburbanites who would otherwise drive cars. When this priority came into conflict with other service priorities of low-income and minority groups, the town of Parker began to push back against RTD and the regional approach to planning transit. "I believe in mass transportation and options, but right now we are not getting it. The return on investment is horrible," councilmember Todd Hendreks said (Minor, 2021b).

## **2. Governor Polis and RTD**

Colorado Governor Jared Polis, a Democrat, is a vocal critic of RTD, and these criticisms have arisen from what he sees as a lack of prioritization of service to and from suburban taxpayers. In June of 2020, amidst the backdrop of COVID-19 service cuts, particularly in Metro Denver's outlying suburbs, Polis announced the creation of an RTD accountability committee (*RTD Will Collaborate with Independent Accountability Committee*, 2020). In the announcement, Polis specifically expressed "the lingering frustration of north and northwest suburban taxpayers in seeing a FasTracks train line delayed for decades..." (*RTD Will*

*Collaborate with Independent Accountability Committee*, 2020). The delayed FasTracks line he alluded to is the B line with planned service from Denver to Boulder and Longmont.

Governor Polis is especially critical of the indefinitely delayed B line to Boulder, his hometown. During the pandemic, Polis argued RTD should use COVID relief funding in order to move the B line project forward (Minor, 2021b). RTD, however, was prioritizing that money for restoring service cuts from the prior year. As discussed earlier, low-income and minority populations were the focus of that priority. This is, of course, at odds with the promised B line, which would provide service for Boulder and Longmont residents that wanted to go to downtown Denver. This conflict exemplifies how the neoliberal goals of FasTracks and the equity goals of COVID-era RTD are in tension with each other, contriving to unravel the spatial constituencies supporting the delivery of the original FasTracks system investments.

Polis argued that Boulder residents have not received what they were promised. FasTracks included both the B line commuter rail as well as the Flatiron Flyer (FF) BRT route. However, the B line was never fully constructed, and it is unclear if it will ever reach Boulder. The FF is a BRT route connecting Boulder and Denver. The route has several lines which run with a 15-minute headway during peak hours, all going between Denver and Boulder (RTD, 2018). During the pandemic, only three of the seven lines had service, and of those three only one had 15-minute headway service (*Combined September and COVID-19 Service Changes*, n.d.). Later Polis doubled down on his criticism of RTD. In an interview in August of 2021, Polis discussed RTD in the context of a state transportation bill that notably did not include any additional funding for the transit agency. When asked about the lack of funding, Polis commented, “what they need is reform not money and they're getting quite a bit of money from the federal government” (Jimenez, 2021).



### **3. The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and RTD**

The comment above from Polis foreshadowed action that CDOT, the state transportation agency, took in October of 2021. Under the direction of Polis, CDOT executive director Shoshana Lew withheld \$34 million in federal relief funding from RTD unless it agreed to use the money to restore FF services between Denver and Boulder (Minor, 2021e). This direction was in conflict with RTD's plans to spend the money on improving low-income and minority service, especially for front-line workers, many living in inner-city neighborhoods (Minor, 2021d). Eventually the money was given to Boulder County, not RTD. This was supported by both RTD and Boulder, though it did prompt backlash from RTD leaders (Minor, 2021d). RTD board member Shontel Lewis, who represents RTD District B stretching eastwards from downtown Denver to DIA, commented that regionalism would not work if Polis and CDOT were able to bully RTD into certain actions, wondering if it was time for RTD and Boulder to separate (Lewis, 2021).

The statements of Parker, Governor Polis, CDOT and RTD Director Lewis make it clear that the regional structure used to pass FasTracks is fragmenting along the lines of different urban and suburban spaces representing diverse transit social groupings and interests. This fragmentation intensifies as the neoliberal service goals of FasTracks come into conflict with the low-income and minority focus of service changes introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. With economic pressures applied on services from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that RTD would have to choose between serving the neoliberal goals of FasTracks to promote choice or the social justice motivated demands of front-line workers and low-income and minority riders who are dependent upon RTD services. The political fallout of that decision has been negative reactions from representatives of suburban areas of the RTD service area, who

believe they are not getting what they paid for. But it should also be noted that many constituents living and working in Denver's inner-city neighborhoods likewise feel that transit service is inadequate for their needs, fueling statements from RTD officials that sacrifices in the form of withdrawal of services to outlying cities are necessary. COVID-induced service cutbacks have thus strained the entire transit system and the neoliberal model of city-regional collaboration that has hitherto driven its expansion and operation.

## **Conclusion**

In a paper published in 2014, Jonas et al. (2014, p. 2463) reflected on the future prospects for the city-regional approach that led to the passage of the FasTracks transit expansion, acknowledging the tensions underlying the regional compact: "How long these new city-regionalist structures can be sustained is hard to say, but it does depend on the governance of territorial politics." In this article, we have demonstrated that tensions in transit service planning are caused when neoliberal assumptions and logics foreground the planning and expansion of a transit system. Such tensions grow into conflicts when transit agencies are forced to make service cuts due to austerity, such as those forced upon many US transit agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have shown how neoliberalism (fostering consumer choice) and social justice (promoting social equity) are conflicting paradigms of public transit service provision. Where neoliberalism is an economic and governance model organized to raise private capital and thus redistribute wealth and resources back towards the already-wealthy (Harvey, 2007), social equity focuses service provision to those who are most in need of it. When transit agencies are forced to choose more directly between these two approaches, and when certain spatial

groupings of transit users are privileged over others, there are political consequences of a territorial nature.

It is worth discussing why a neoliberal model of collective provision rooted in principles of consumer choice was abandoned by RTD during the pandemic, what concrete circumstances led to this, and whether or not it reverses the trend towards “splintering urbanism”.

Neoliberalism has long been considered hegemonic and difficult to challenge. Yet, RTD was able to do just that with their service cuts and reorientation of their goals. We conjecture that there are two primary reasons that RTD was able to do this, both of which result from federal level interference with the city-regional level transit agency. The first is due to pre-pandemic legislation around Title VI, which requires that major service changes do not disproportionately impact low income or minority populations. When austerity due to the pandemic forced service cuts to be made, RTD interpreted Title VI as requiring those cuts to preserve as much low income and minority service as possible.

The second reason is that RTD received \$232 million dollars from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in April of 2020. This infusion of cash at the federal level is also counter to neoliberal assumptions of transit funding, which would support funding through some combination of PPPs, city-regionalism, and/or privatization. With a significant share of its funding coming from a federal source in lieu of local sources such as the regional sales tax, RTD was less beholden to its more affluent suburban constituents. Moreover, the pandemic forced RTD to focus on minority and low income populations via its Title VI requirements while also providing funding from a federal source via the CARES Act. We posit that these two interventions provide a blueprint for challenging neoliberal hegemony and potentially reversing a “splintering urbanism” trend in infrastructure provision. More research,

time, and resources devoted to this considerations are necessary to determine if this blueprint can be utilized by other transit-dependent interests and local jurisdictions and if it will provide lasting departures from neoliberal practices in transit governance.

In Metro Denver, the passage of FasTracks and the city-regional alliance that was instrumental in passing it were fundamentally premised upon neoliberal understandings of the purpose of public transportation. As such, it is not surprising that when RTD chose to emphasize the equity/social justice-motivated priority of low income and minority riders it alienated members of the city-regional electoral coalition that underpinned the passage of the FasTracks funding arrangements in 2004. Although RTD's approach fits with recent scholarship advocating transport justice as a central pivot of transit investments (Pereira et al., 2017) it was at odds with the neoliberal ideas of competition and choice that motivated the original FasTracks city-regional alliance. RTD's newfound equity and transport justice focus alienated members of the city-regional alliance.

When first approved, FasTracks and subsequently the Eagle P3 project were widely touted by transit planners in other US city-regions as successful models of transit funding (Jonas et al., 2019). FasTracks was especially noteworthy because of the innovative nature of the city-regional alliance that shaped the relationship between regional business and civic interests, becoming an exemplar of a "metropolitan revolution" sweeping across the USA (Katz & Bradley, 2013). However, it now appears that the writing may be on the wall for the RTD city-regional alliance.

Because Denver's city-regional approach to transit planning internalizes neoliberal logics and practices of competition and urban entrepreneurialism, the corresponding transit system that has been rolled out is suffused with neoliberal ideals and expectations for what transit should do

in practice, namely, widen consumer choice, lubricate inter-urban competition, attract global finance, and transfer risk from the public to the private sector. These ideals are seen in the framing of FasTracks as it was first developed, its subsequent implementation using PPPs, as well as the goals of FasTracks currently. These goals, however, are increasingly in tension with discourse and practices of equity or transport justice. This paper demonstrates how the city-regional approach to infrastructure development, when used as an instrument of neoliberal urbanism, does not result in a transit system with equity or justice as priorities.

The fragility of the city-regional alliance sustaining FasTracks was exposed by COVID-19 pandemic-induced austerity, when RTD had to choose between preserving transit service for wealthy suburban residents and low-income populations. As FasTracks rolled out across the Denver city-region, its stated goals to improve the economy, create transit choice for wealthy residents, and improve property values through TOD were quite literally constructed around specific urban spaces and attendant governance structures. However, these transit-driven ‘circulation spaces of urban politics’ (Ward et al., 2018) soon came into conflict with those constructed around social justice and equity, such as preserving transit routes for low-income populations in suburbs and essential workers living in inner-city neighborhoods. The consequences of this conflict highlight that, while the collaborative city-regional approach may be necessary for attracting international capital to fund infrastructure improvements, it may have a short life span if it fails to anticipate the further splintering of territorial governance and constituent services and infrastructures around these different spaces of urban politics.

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