

March 30, 2026/Colorado Politics: Killing Off the Regional Transportation District

This column is appearing the same day Senator Matt Ball (D) of Denver and his legislative co-sponsors unveil legislation implementing many of the recommendations advanced by last summer's RTD Accountability Committee. Although it isn't readily apparent, they have allowed themselves to be enlisted in a plot that will likely lead to the bankruptcy and then the dissolution of the Regional Transportation District within the next five years. That, of course, is not their intention. In fact, they envision themselves as reformers focused on strengthening an agency they perceive to be in decline. A slight reworking of philosopher George Santayana's admonition, "Those who cannot learn from the mistakes of the past are destined to repeat them," is instructive regarding how otherwise competent legislators are misfiring so badly.

When assessing the challenges facing RTD, it's important to recognize they are not unique. Two weeks ago, the New York Times reported on the fiscal challenges facing BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) and CALTRANS in northern California, where ridership is half their pre-COVID level. Boston, Philadelphia and Washington are also in fiscal trouble. The most startling observation from a member of its Board as reported in the Times was, "BART is not too big to fail." A frequent charge against the competency of RTD is that the elected Board has failed to return ridership to 2019 daily trips. The Accountability Committee ignored testimony from the Board that they are fully aware of this ridership erosion, pointing out that attracting riders is largely dependent on running more buses and trains more often. This costs money the agency currently lacks.

Last week the San Diego Union-Tribune devoted most of its editorial section to discussion of the impending bankruptcies facing transit operators throughout the state of California. Fourteen systems are facing imminent bankruptcies later this year, including Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner and the COASTER connecting Los Angeles and San Diego. They are now racing one another to the ballot box for revenue relief from voters. There will be winners and losers. The paper points out that nationally, "By 2015, after a 130% increase in the nation's working population and substantial government (taxpayer) subsidies, transit usage was still slightly less than it was 55 years prior." Editors question whether increasing subsidies for services with declining ridership is a rational policy. Counter-intuitively, the largest loss of riders has occurred among low-income workers who purchased used cars during the pandemic – having no more appetite for traveling on COVID buses and trains than their wealthier neighbors.

They go on to explain that, "...for many government officials who are spending taxpayer money and don't have shareholders to worry about, their belief in public transit is unwavering. So what if it needs more than 80% in subsidies, year in and year out, and soon maybe 90%. Transit is inherently good and cars are inherently bad. And, if a great majority of Californians disagree, tough luck for them."

In Colorado, we can include most environmental groups as sharing this mindset. With the exception of Green Latinos, they've lined up in lockstep supporting Ball's bill. Groupthink, without adequate reflection, is on the march. The Union-Tribune may sound like it opposes public transit. Consider this, "Our backs are against the wall, and the stakes couldn't be higher. Without decisive intervention, we face a future with dramatically reduced rail and transit service and far fewer transportation options." The same can be said for RTD. While Colorado managers were careful to husband dollars during the pandemic, purchasing us an extra year or two before encountering our own fiscal crisis, RTD predicts a \$120-200 million budget shortfall in the near future. Whether it is the existing elected Board or some half-baked hybrid Board composed of far fewer elected members and a handful of appointed 'experts', RTD will have to ask voters for expanded revenues to service its debt and cover operating costs going forward.

Let's return to RTD's history and the mistakes of the past. The appointed board that existed prior to 1980 failed three times to win voter support for transit proposals not to mention compiling a record of overt corruption, misfeasance and incompetence. It is predictable that experts look very much like cronies. Only upon voter approval of an elected board did RTD's service improve. It required nearly a decade to fix the bus system and another two attempts to win voter approval of FasTracks. Democracy has not proven perfect but, over time, it has proven successful. Before the Legislature opts to replace the current elected Board, however, members should consider which version of an RTD Board is more likely to successfully persuade voters to keep transit afloat: 15 elected members representing districts across RTD's service area or a few elected members from mega-districts as large as Congressional seats plus unknown appointees?

Why are riders discounted as experts? Over the past 44 years, our elected system has assured virtually continuous representation from our African-American and Hispanic, both of which are disproportionately dependent on reliable transit service. Isn't it likely that the proposed reform scheme is nearly certain to assure there is never again a brown or black face sitting at the table (or a disabled rider for that matter)? Quoting again from the San Diego editors, "No major public transit system covers its costs solely through fares. Stable funding – from taxes, state and federal (not before 2029) sources, and other revenue streams – is essential for operations and long-term improvements." The RTD Accountability Committee concluded and is now parroted by Senator Ball and his cohorts that finding solutions is just too much to expect from mere elected officials.

At a time when democracy is under daily assault nationally, there is considerable irony in the fact that it is primarily Democrats denying the value of democratic governance in Colorado. If appointed RTD Directors will deliver superior leadership, why not appoint our legislators as well? How and why would this change improve transit service for riders? No group has thought harder or longer about the changes in our economy that have reduced transit ridership than the staff and Directors at RTD. Who anticipated the work-at-home transformation subsequent to COVID? Downtown Denver office vacancies exceed 30% and when workers only use an office a day or two each week, perhaps ride-sharing apps are more flexible and potentially cheaper than purchasing an RTD monthly pass. It's also time to consider whether door-to-door, ride-sharing services may be better suited for many disabled riders.

Although there has been occasional grumbling from local government leaders, the possible loss of a local director has set off alarms at both the Metro Mayor's caucus and DRCOG. Nothing could be more distant than a director representing 650,000 residents. Will voters trust Directors that have to raise half a million dollars to get elected? Will candidates who can raise that kind of campaign money work to promote campaigns on behalf of tax proposals funding RTD? Don't count on it. It didn't work in the past and isn't likely to work in the future. Democracy has its uses. If reform leads to the collapse of RTD, Matt Ball and the role his allies played in causing that will be forgotten. A reconstituted elected Board will have to pick up the pieces.

Miller Hudson

Littleton, Colorado



April 7, 2026

House Energy & Environment Committee
Colorado General Assembly
200 E. Colfax Avenue
Denver, CO 80203

Re: SB26- 150 Modernizing Regional Transportation District

Dear Transportation & Energy Committee.

My name is Ann Sutton, living in Westminster CO. This testimony represents the position of the League of Women Voters of Colorado in Support of SB26-150 that addresses recommendations for changes in governance to improve efficiency, diversity, and experience of the Board of Directors. We believe that implementation of the described changes will strengthen transparency and accountability of the Board.

The League supports measures to improve the coordination, effectiveness, efficiency, and economical operation of local government units. Public mass transportation improvements are a high priority.

Our thanks to the sponsors for recognizing the importance of comprehensive planning for improving service to RTD riders with disabilities, often an under-served part of our community.

We ask the Committee for your full support of the goals of this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ann Sutton". The signature is written in a cursive style and is placed on a light blue rectangular background.

Ann Sutton Volunteer Lobbyist
League of Women Voters of Colorado
110 16th Street Mall
Suite 1326
Denver, CO 80202

Senate Transportation & Energy

04/08/2026

SB26-150 Modernizing Regional Transportation District

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
<p>Davon Williams</p> <p>For themselves</p>	<p>Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,</p> <p>My name is Davon Williams, and I am a candidate for Colorado House District 3, representing communities in both Denver and Arapahoe County. I previously served on a local board of education, where I focused on accountability, access, and the effective delivery of public services.</p> <p>I am writing in support of SB26-150 and its efforts to modernize the Regional Transportation District.</p> <p>Reliable transportation is essential to the communities I am seeking to represent. It affects access to employment, education, healthcare, and overall economic mobility. In many parts of House District 3, residents rely on transit systems that must be consistent, accessible, and responsive to real-world needs.</p> <p>I appreciate that this bill takes a comprehensive approach—particularly around improving accountability, strengthening governance, and addressing gaps in service for riders, including those with disabilities. The requirement for a third-party analysis and long-term planning for paratransit services is especially important, as it centers the experiences of riders who are often most impacted when systems fall short.</p> <p>Efforts to better align governance with population and ridership, improve oversight, and ensure follow-through on prior recommendations are important steps toward rebuilding trust in RTD.</p>

	<p>As you consider this bill, I encourage continued focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delivering measurable improvements in service reliability • ensuring accessibility and equity for riders across the region • maintaining transparency and accountability in implementation • aligning governance structures with the needs of a growing and diverse population <p>Modernizing RTD is ultimately about ensuring that the system works for the people who depend on it every day.</p> <p>Thank you for your time and consideration.</p> <p>Sincerely, Davon Williams</p>
<p>Jef Otte For themselves</p>	<p>I like taking the bus. Since I was a kid, I've felt public transportation was the most fun way to get around, and as an adult, I like that I can settle in and knock out work during my commute, instead of sitting behind the wheel not getting anything done.</p> <p>So it says something that I hardly ever take the bus anymore.</p> <p>The service is spotty. Where I live, in the northwest suburbs, the routes are so sparse it's hardly a practical way to get around, unless I'm going either to downtown Denver, downtown Boulder, or the airport. And while those routes are valuable, they're also unreliable, and I can't afford to wonder whether the bus that's supposed to come is actually going to show up. It's been this way for years. RTD needs reform.</p> <p>A change in the structure of the board - to a leaner, better paid, more empowered board with real expertise - is a step in the right direction. The RTD accountability committee, appointed by this body, has</p>

	<p>returned with this recommendation, and now itâ€™s time to make that recommendation a reality.</p> <p>Will it work? I sure hope so. It may be an iterative process. Either way, itâ€™s clear that a change will need to happen. I urge this committee to advance this bill and start that change.</p>
<p>Joseph Pero Against themselves</p>	<p>I oppose SB26-150. While framed as an accountability measure, this bill significantly reduces democratic representation by shrinking the RTD board from 15 elected members to just 5, replacing nearly half with gubernatorial appointees. This shift risks consolidating power at the state level and weakening the voice of local communities and transit riders.</p> <p>The proposal also raises barriers to public participation by increasing petition requirements for candidates and restructuring districts based partly on ridership, which may underrepresent less-served areas that most need investment.</p> <p>Additionally, increasing board compensation and reducing quorum requirements could diminish transparency and public trust rather than improve it.</p> <p>RTD absolutely needs reform, but those reforms should strengthen, not weaken, voter control, equity in representation, and accountability to the public.</p> <p>For these reasons, I respectfully urge a “no” vote.</p> <p>Thank you for your consideration.</p>