

# RTD Systemwide Fare Study and Equity Analysis

## *Phase Three Engagement Milestone Summary*

### **Study Background**

In response to feedback from customers that fares are expensive and difficult to understand, RTD launched a Systemwide Fare Study and Equity Analysis. The study is examining the fare system holistically, with the objective of creating a fare structure that is more equitable, affordable and simple.

The study incorporates three distinct phases of engagement to gather customer and community input and share updates on progress. The first phase, held in spring 2022, was launched to identify challenges with the current fare system and to receive input on fare structure preferences. The second phase, held in summer 2022, provided an overview of the customer and stakeholder feedback heard during the first phase, as well as what conceptual fare options are under consideration and the process of evaluation. The third phase, held in fall 2022, introduced two proposed fare structure alternatives as well as additional fare policies and programs and gathered public feedback to refine the designs. An overview of the third phase engagement activities, feedback received and next steps in the study is provided below.

### **Engagement Activities Overview**

Through the engagement activities conducted in the third phase of the Systemwide Fare Study and Equity Analysis, the study team gathered feedback on two preliminary fare structure alternatives under consideration by RTD, as well as numerous policies and programs. The following methods were included as part of this milestone to inform the public about the proposed options and gather input from a diverse set of perspectives:

- Website and Social Media
- Fare Feedback Survey
- Customer and Community Meetings (in English and Spanish)
- Community Partner Focus Groups
- Community-Based Organization Survey
- Feedback Panels

Additionally, language assistance measures and effective communications were implemented. While the customer and community meetings were hosted and website information was conveyed proactively in English and Spanish, numerous methods were made readily available to collect feedback outside of those two languages. Each activity yielded valuable feedback from customers and community members that will help to inform the final recommendation.

### **Website and Social Media**

In October, the study team launched a dedicated secondary website, farefeedback.rtd-denver.com in English and comentariosobrelatarifa.rtd-denver.com in Spanish, to educate the public on the fare structure alternatives, policies and programs under consideration by RTD. Opportunities to engage in the fare study's third phase were promoted on the Fare Feedback website and the Fare Study page, rtd-denver.com/farestudy. In addition to organic social media posts, RTD deployed a paid social media campaign to reach targeted audiences. Relevant statistics on website and social media engagement are listed below:

#### Fare Study Website Key Statistics (October – December)

- 3,356 page views; 2,582 unique views
- 2,574 entrances directly to the website

#### Fare Feedback Website Key Statistics (October – December)

- 6,200 page views; 4,761 unique views

#### Social Media Statistics (October – December)

- 130,812 impressions

### **Fare Feedback Survey**

To gather insight from a diverse group of previous, current and prospective customers, RTD deployed a second survey, which was open from October – November 2022. The survey, available online and on paper in English and in Spanish, included a description of the two proposed fare structures and asked participants to select their preferred alternative. The survey also included questions related to select policies and programs under consideration by RTD.

Based on self-reported data, respondents represented all 8 counties throughout the RTD service area. The survey, which was promoted through virtual meetings, by community partners, at events and on the website and social media, received 3,910 responses.

### **Customer and Community Meetings**

The project team held two virtual Customer and Community Meetings – one in English (October 20) and one in Spanish (October 27), with attendance of 46 and 41 participants, respectively. The meetings were promoted by the third phase launch press release, website and social media posts, targeted emails to the project's distribution list, radio interviews, community partner navigators and promotoras, media mentions and word-of-mouth marketing.

The study team presented the purpose of the study and the fare structure development process; a comparison of two proposed fare structures; and an outline of additional policies and programs under consideration. Participants shared their preferences on the fare structure alternatives as well as select policies and programs via polls and the chat box. Throughout the meetings, time was reserved for attendee questions and comments.

### **Community Partner Focus Groups**

RTD continued to partner with six contracted community-based organizations to promote opportunities to engage with the study amongst the community members they serve and host

focus groups to gather qualitative feedback on the alternatives, policies and programs under consideration. Following Train-the-Trainer sessions in Spanish and English on October 11 and 13, the community partners held focus groups virtually and in-person between October 20 and November 18 in both languages.

A total of 84 community members participated in the focus groups, representing a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds, household incomes and use of RTD services.

### **Community-Based Organization Survey**

Community-based organizations play many roles in helping the community members they serve access public transit. RTD developed a survey specifically targeted towards representatives of community-based organizations in order to gather feedback on:

- Which proposed fare structure would best serve their community members;
- How to improve access to the income-based LiVE discount;
- What additional discounts would make fares more affordable for community members;
- How to design grant and discount programs for nonprofits or community-serving organizations; and
- How to design programs for residents of affordable housing communities.

The survey was open from November 7 to November 30 and received responses from 53 staff members representing organizations in the nonprofit, education, government, affordable housing, advocacy, religious, workforce and healthcare sectors.

### **Feedback Panels**

Three Feedback Panels (Equity, Pass Program and Jurisdiction) were held on November 30 and December 5. The meetings gathered input from Feedback Panel members on potential improvements to the fare structure alternatives and the policies and programs under consideration based on feedback received from customers, community members and representatives of community-based organizations.

## **Summary of Feedback Provided and Questions Posed**

The following provides an overview of the general themes observed about fare structure preferences and the policies and programs under consideration through quantitative and qualitative data. Feedback received on topics beyond the scope of the fare study is included in the engagements' individual summaries, but not reflected in this milestone summary.

### ***Fare Structure Preference By Segment***

Survey data shows that levels of support for each alternative varied across segments of the community. Overall, a majority of participants across all engagement opportunities expressed a preference for Alternative B, including:

- 72% of survey respondents overall.
- 54.7% of community-based organization representatives.
- 90% of community partner focus group participants.
- 73% of participants at the English Customer and Community Meeting.
- 90% of the participants at the Spanish Customer and Community Meeting.

However, 50% of low-income survey respondents indicated a preference for Alternative A with the other half preferring Alternative B, and 65% of respondents who took the survey in Spanish preferred Alternative A.

### *Themes on Fare Structures*

Participants engaged during this phase of the study supported **Alternative A** because this fare structure would:

- Provide savings for financially burdened customers due to the lower Local fare.
- Reward frequent customers due to the large reduction in the Local Monthly Pass price.
- Offer the best option for families with multiple riders and those community members who only need to travel short distances for the resources they need.
- Encourage additional RTD use due to lower fares.

Participants engaged during this phase of the study expressed the following concerns about Alternative A:

- The fare structure is not simplified and remains confusing.
- Fares that are not full dollar amounts place a burden on those who pay in cash and need to have exact change.
- Fares have not decreased enough compared to the current fare structure.

Notably, during the first phase of engagement, the RTD study team learned that many customers and community members were divided about whether fares should be priced to reflect the distance of travel and value of service. To reflect this preference, Alternative A kept the distinction between Local and Regional fare. However, in the survey deployed during this phase of engagement, “fare levels are maintained to reflect the distance of travel and value of service” was ranked as the lowest priority among Alternative A’s features.

Participants engaged during this phase of the study supported **Alternative B** because this fare structure would:

- Make fares easier to understand and more predictable for current as well as new customers.
- Reduce the price for traveling long distances, which would benefit Regional riders.
- Lower the Monthly Pass price, providing unlimited travel anywhere in the RTD service area for under \$100 per month.
- Provide savings for airport workers and frequent airport travelers.

Some phase 3 fare study participants believed that these benefits could encourage increased transit use as the cost-competitiveness of RTD services increases, which would contribute to reduced traffic and environmental benefits.

Participants engaged during this phase of the study expressed the following concerns about Alternative B:

- Prices are not lowered for Local customers, who make up a majority of RTD’s ridership and in particular the ridership of equity populations (2021 ridership data shows that 83% of customers used the Local fare level).
- The benefits for Regional customers may encourage longer distance trips and urban sprawl.
- The Monthly Pass price, while lowered, remains a burden for families.

### *Fare Structure Suggestions*

In some of the engagements, participants were also encouraged to provide suggestions to improve the alternatives to benefit as many RTD customers as possible. To do so, the following suggestions were provided:

- Lower the Monthly Pass even further.
  - Do so by raising the Airport fare while ensuring airport employees are not financially impacted.
- Expand the timeframe of the 3-Hour pass or lower the price – and allow time for a regional round-trip in the pass timeframe.
- Allow for organizations to add value to a client’s RTD account or to subsidize a client’s RTD fare.
- Explore other funding sources to balance decreased fare revenue.
- Lower the Local/Regional fare while maintaining a simple fare structure (similar to Alternative B).

### *Themes on Policies and Programs Under Consideration*

Engagement participants, which included customer and community members, community-based organization representatives, focus group participants and feedback panel participants, were given the opportunity to provide support for or opposition to the other policies and programs under consideration as part of the fare study. Feedback outlined below is aggregated from all methods of engagement, unless otherwise noted.

#### *Changes to Discount Fares*

Participants broadly expressed support for a single fare for travel anywhere in the RTD service area for customers paying discounted fares. For example, if the Local fare was \$3.00, customers paying discount fares would pay:

- **\$1.50** - seniors, persons with disabilities and LiVE customers at a 50% discount.
- **\$0.90** - youth at a 70% discount.

Customers paying discount fares would pay the Local fare price to travel to any destination, even if there are multiple fare levels for customers paying full fare (Local, Regional and Airport under Alternative A or Airport and non-airport under Alternative B).

Participants also broadly agreed that RTD should consider offering a 70% Monthly Pass discount for customers paying discounted fares, with support ranging from 82-96%.

Participants noted that both policies would:

- Encourage more transit use, resulting in less traffic.
- Offer benefits for financially burdened customers.
- Provide low-income airport workers with a lower fare.
- Help achieve the study's goal of equity.

### ***Free Fares for Youth***

During phase 3, participants provided support for free fare for youth. In particular, some noted that children should not be required to pay because they do not have an income. Others noted that historically, youth up to 15 could ride free on SkyRide routes with paying adults due to a policy in effect in the 1990s. To support this effort, participants suggested that free fares for youth would:

- Help youth get to school or to college classes, especially in inclement weather.
- Ensure young people can get where they need to go, overcoming barriers such as not driving, not having a car or having schedules that do not align with their parents' work schedules.
- Provide more freedom and independence for youth.
- Help youth feel comfortable with RTD, which would encourage future ridership.
- Save families money, create financial stability in households and allow funding currently used for youth transportation to be used for other family needs such as food.
- Save parents time if youth have their own transportation.

Participants also emphasized the importance of RTD securing outside funding to implement the program. Suggestions for sources of this funding included the state legislature. Most participants also showed support for an age-based definition of "youth" (i.e. ages 6-18/19 as opposed to those still in K-12 education).

### ***LiVE Discount***

Participants also supported decreasing barriers to accessing the LiVE discount program, increasing the income threshold required to qualify (from 185% to 200%), and having RTD partner with community-based organizations to support the sign-up process. Some participants indicated that the income threshold should be higher than 200% to ensure all community members in need qualify for the program.

Some participants also suggested implementing a more straightforward sign-up process (particularly one that is streamlined and/or connected to other benefits or services) and noted that customers would also benefit from additional options to sign up for LiVE outside of the PEAK benefits system. Others suggested having RTD partner with county open-enrollment

efforts; provide LiVE identification card pick-up locations for those who have difficulty accessing mail; offer same-day printing locations; and decrease the number of documents necessary for the LiVE discount.

### ***Transit Assistance Grant***

Support was expressed for RTD's proposed transit assistance grant program, which would allow nonprofit organizations and social service agencies to provide free or deeply discounted passes for financially-burdened individuals. Some respondents noted that this would help organizations meet climate change goals by helping them provide transit passes for staff and/or clients.

To modify the program, RTD was encouraged to:

- Establish a simple application process that does not further burden organizations.
- Limit and streamline the reporting requirements for organizations.
- Consider timing the grants for cycles most convenient to organizations.
- Provide paper passes to support those customers who experience persistent technological barriers.
- Provide discounts on RTD services for grantee organizations.
- Allow for the grants to cover a full year of passes.
- Avoid limiting access to the grant program to non-profits, instead offering to small businesses as well.
- Host fundraisers to ensure funds for the program and/ or ask community-based organizations to help raise funds.

### ***Bulk Purchase Program***

Support for a bulk discount program varied. Those in favor suggested that bulk discounts might:

- Encourage greater use of public transportation.
- Enable organizations to purchase more passes.
- Support clients of participating organizations to meet staff in the community.
- Be used by community navigators to promote RTD services.
- Help nonprofits and small businesses too small for EcoPass.

To modify the program, some encouraged RTD to:

- Work with organizations with memberships to include a certain number of passes as part of the membership.
- Lower the \$2,000 minimum threshold.

### ***Pass Program Updates***

Participants engaged throughout this phase showed support for changes to various pass-related programs.

For the EcoPass program, some showed support for the consolidation of the Service Level Areas from four to three to simplify the program for employers with fewer than 3,000 employees. Some also expressed support for lowering the minimum employee threshold.



For the Neighborhood EcoPass, some showed concern that the pass does not allow for the application of other discounts (e.g. youth, LiVE, etc.). Participants encouraged RTD to create a mechanism whereby a city or organization would be able to subsidize a customer's RTD Neighborhood EcoPass fare – suggesting that this could help cities meet their climate change goals.

### ***Affordable Housing Program***

A significant portion of community-based organization survey participants who work in affordable housing showed support for authorizing affordable housing providers to certify tenants as LiVE eligible. They indicated this certification program would support tenants with mobility needs, provide useful discounts for tenants, ensure digital equity and reduce the administrative burden on RTD and community-based organizations. However, some noted that the additional administrative burden faced by affordable housing could be a potential barrier to certification.

Support was also shown for participating in an affordable housing Neighborhood EcoPass program. However, some expressed concern that this may add further administrative burden for affordable housing providers. Other possible barriers included, among others:

- Tenants already having access to EcoPasses through employers.
- The burden of paying for passes and determining if/how to pass on transportation costs to residents vs. cost-sharing.
- Participating organizations identifying and meeting contract minimums, as it would likely be difficult to assess initial participation in the program.
- Different housing authorities using different Area Media Income (AMI) thresholds.
- Housing authorities working towards mixed-income developments (thus disqualifying them if they don't meet the 100% affordable requirement).

Some feedback panel participants encouraged RTD to provide two separate passes – one for 100% affordable housing providers and another for mixed-income units. Feedback panel participants also encouraged RTD to conduct an affordable housing focus group to work out the details; to work with housing authorities to define "affordable"; to provide a jurisdiction with the Affordable Housing EcoPass whereby a city or county housing authority could provide transit for all affordable housing participants (similar to Boulder County); and to potentially lower the 100% threshold. Other feedback panelists encouraged RTD to avoid creating a new pass program, instead focusing on making the LiVE program more accessible.

### **Next Steps**

Following this phase of the study, the project team will assess and incorporate the feedback received into the final design of the fare structure, policies and programs. During the next phase of engagement, the study team will inform customers and community members of the refined fare structure and provide an opportunity for community members to submit a public comment. The study team will then make a recommendation to the RTD Board of Directors for adoption.