

**Karen Benker Response to Greater Denver Transit  
Candidate for RTD Board, District I  
Longmont, Broomfield, Lafayette  
August 21, 2024**

1. What are your top 3 priorities (e.g., specific initiatives such as Vision Zero) if elected as a Board member? Why are these your top 3 priorities? Do these align with what you believe should be the overall Board's priorities?

**---Rail Line to Longmont.** My top priority is to build the NW rail line to Longmont as voted on by taxpayers in 2004. Boulder and Broomfield taxpayers are frustrated with RTD's lack of interest in finishing Fastracks and they have not forgotten that our rail line has been scheduled for 2050. Communities along the line have paid RTD over half a billion dollars in Fastrack taxes for other rail lines and now want our line completed in the next few years (per SB 24-184 and SB 24-230). I believe there now are funds to build the line. No more waiting.

**---Restore Service.** Bus service was drastically cut due to COVID several years ago. Its time to restore service and build ridership back up (like what other transit agencies had been doing for the past 2 years). RTD is sitting on an enormous reserve. Its time to be strategic and thoughtful and fulfill our mission to provide service.

**---Resource Management.** I have extensive expertise in government and non-profit financial management. I understand annual budgeting issues, revenue estimating, and general financial management techniques. (Served in the Governor's Budget Office for 10 years, Budget Director for the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, and Finance Director for a local non-profit.) While it is imperative to maintain RTD's AAA bond rating, it is also imperative that resources are used efficiently to provide the transit services needed by the community. A financial balance needs to be achieved between frugal spending, reasonable reserves, and providing service as mandated by state statute. Maintaining a \$1 billion reserve needs to be reexamined. In addition, the state now has 2 new revenue sources for RTD to request and use.

**--Creating New Partnerships.** The Governor and State Legislature have passed recent laws requiring RTD to work constructively with Front Range Passenger Rail and CDOT to build the NW rail line and rail along the entire Front Range of Colorado. This will require all 3 agencies to work together on technology, construction contracts, resource sharing, data sharing, and project oversight. We need to make these partnerships successful.

2. What do you think is the most effective way to make change and/or advocate for effective policies on the Board? How would you advocate for increased transparency on and for the Board?

I served on RTD from 1992 to 2000. I worked closely with our region's mayors and other elected representatives to move issues forward. Board relationships are important and finding consensus is the way to get projects moving forward. However, it is also important to form

working relationships with transit users, legislators, and the Governor's Office to achieve success in providing a high quality transit system.

Transparency is critical to regain trust from our taxpayers and transit riders. When issues arise, it should be the General Manager that speaks on TV and radio talking about solutions—not lower-level staff. Constant contact with the press is vital—both when good things happen and when problems arise.

3. What are your plans for constituent outreach? How will you work to ensure the riders in your district and the general public are able to successfully engage with you and/or RTD on issues concerning them?

Since I am the only candidate for District I, I have already reached out to the mayors and city council members of Broomfield and Lafayette and several in Longmont. I plan on going to city council meetings in the next few weeks during Public Invited To Be Heard and introduce myself to the elected officials and to the public in each city.

I will have a website where I will add relevant information about RTD and service changes on a regular basis.

I will always be available for coffee with constituents. I want to be at all RTD meetings held in my district for consultation on service improvements that occur 3x each year.

4. There has been a lot of talk about growing ridership in recent years. Who do you see as the most important groups to focus on in growing ridership? What actions can RTD take to increase this ridership in the near future (outside of hiring more operators)?

Growing ridership is not rocket science. Past practices can be brought forward as well as talking with other transit agencies across the country for creative ideas.

However, first the public must feel safe when riding RTD. New measures must be taken to make trips safe and this needs to be widely published/advertised so that the public knows that their concerns have been heard and addressed.

Service must be reliable. I have heard from transit riders that often times, the bus does not show up. Train service must be restored. Running trains at 10 mph kills ridership increases. Accurate real time information must be reliable.

Once RTD is safe and reliable, RTD needs to begin a comprehensive PR campaign to bring people back. Services also needs to be increased. Commuters/workers have always been the key ridership group and they now need to be lured back (especially since government and businesses want more of their employees to come back to the office). I would also like to see BroncoRide, RockiesRide reinstated. SkyRide needs expansion. Requests were made to offer rides to Red Rocks for concerts. This should happen.

Local governments are our partners. They know what services they want restored. We work with them as partners.

5. Do you think the current service changes process needs overhaul? If so, what actions would you take to redesign the process? If not, why not?

RTD always had public hearings and meetings in the local areas that were to be affected by service changes were being considered. Transit riders need to be active participants in designing productive service.

And again—local governments are partners in service design and changes.

6. What role do you believe Directors play in resolving the operator shortage? How can RTD improve the recruitment and retention of operators? Could working conditions be improved?

Directors can offer ideas and suggestions regarding hiring practices, but staff is responsible for hiring. RTD offers good jobs and good pay with retirement benefits (which is rare these days). Staff needs to be more creative in looking for employees. As a former director of a state workforce region, I believe my expertise will be helpful to the agency. You do not wait for potential employees to come to RTD, HR must go out into the community and recruit employees.

Working with the union is important. Employees will always be willing to share their opinion about what is needed to make the agency stronger. Listen.

7. What performance/safety metrics, if any, would you like to see RTD make public? Which of these metrics should the GM/CEO be subject to in their performance review(s)?

Ridership numbers. On time performance.

8. The past two summers' worth of repairs to the light rail system, particularly within the SE corridor (E, H, and R lines), have significantly impacted the usability of light rail services.
  - a. What role do you see Directors playing regarding transparency with the public?
  - a. What do you think RTD, Board or otherwise, can do to mitigate similar issues going forward?

RTD has 2 main parts of their budget:

1. Retaining and paying employees and
2. Maintaining their capital stock.

More attention needs to be paid to the capital maintenance budget.

It appears that keeping up-to-date maintenance records on RTD bus stock, rail cars, maintenance facilities, and rail lines and catenary wires has been neglected. Staff should be redirected to keep track of capital stock and prepare an accurate annual capital budget. Buying new buses should not always be the first “go-to” in a capital budget. Standard audit review of the condition of capital stock needs to be implemented. (FYI, CDOT every year has a report that shows what roads are in good, fair, or poor condition. RTD needs a similar measurement.)

And yes, transparency is essential to establish public trust. The General Manager reports to the Board. The Board must be very clear in giving her direction in responding to the public.

2. Regarding safety on transit, there has been increased concern post-pandemic regarding the prevalence of substance abuse/drug use, crime, and other poor behaviors.
  - a. What do you believe is the root and/or cause of these issues on transit?

- a. What solutions do you believe best solve these issues?
- a. What do you believe RTD, Board or otherwise, needs to do to successfully address these issues? What role(s) do you think localities should play in solving these issues? How will these interface?

Hiring security officers, both uniformed and undercover, is necessary to curb the crime that is occurring on rail and buses. RTD must also form relationships with agencies and nonprofits to help with drug and alcohol usage. Often times, the homeless simply want a warm place to sit on a cold winter day and they will choose to sit either on a bus or go to a library. Poor behavior must be quickly dealt with and the rider needs to be removed asap and may be prosecuted.

We must also work with local police departments.

RTD's new technology of live cameras is a great step forward and will help in curbing violence and bad behavior. However, this MUST be widely advertised this new security addition to the public so they can start to feel safe to ride again.

2. Regarding the deBrucing ballot measure headed to voters this fall - do you support the deBrucing ballot measure? Why or why not?

I do support the De-Brucing measure that will be on the November ballot. I plan on writing an Op-Ed piece to our local newspapers asking voters to pass this measure (however, RTD's reputation in parts of Boulder and Broomfield counties is so poor, I suspect the measure may fail here.)

Voters need to have a reason to support the measure. They must be guaranteed additional service if it passes. Allowing RTD to keep surplus revenue will not pass unless the taxpayers are promised better service and RTD implements new service. Trust with RTD is very low and most folks do not believe promises made by RTD. Too many broken promises.