Tennessee Pass Rail Link

Executive Summary | October 2026

Tennessee Pass Rail Link, LLC (TPRL) proposes a phased restoration of tourist rail service along the dormant Tennessee Pass Line in Colorado's Arkansas River Valley. Based in Salida, the operation would initially connect Salida and Buena Vista, with future expansion toward Americus and Leadville at Malta. The goal is to return the corridor to productive use, support local businesses and outdoor recreation, and preserve an important transportation asset for future generations.

Founded by Pete Snyder, a railroad operations professional with 30 years of experience in tourist and passenger rail, TPRL brings a practical startup approach to the project. The proposal begins with a manageable operating segment and basic facilities, allowing service to develop pragmatically as demand, funding, and agreements support expansion.

Proposed Service and Phased Development

The first phase would establish tourist train service over approximately 23 miles between Salida and Buena Vista. Initial service would consist of two daily round trips, with approximately one hour of travel each way and a layover in Buena Vista. Operations would primarily cover spring, summer, and fall, supplemented by selected holiday trains. Additional departures could be introduced during periods of stronger demand.

Subsequent phases would extend service north to Americus, Elephant Rock Campground, and the Railroad Bridge Recreation Site, followed by service to Malta near Leadville. A separate rail bike operation south of Salida toward Swissvale would provide another recreational offering and revenue source. Because rail bikes could be developed separately, this component may advance earlier if conditions permit.

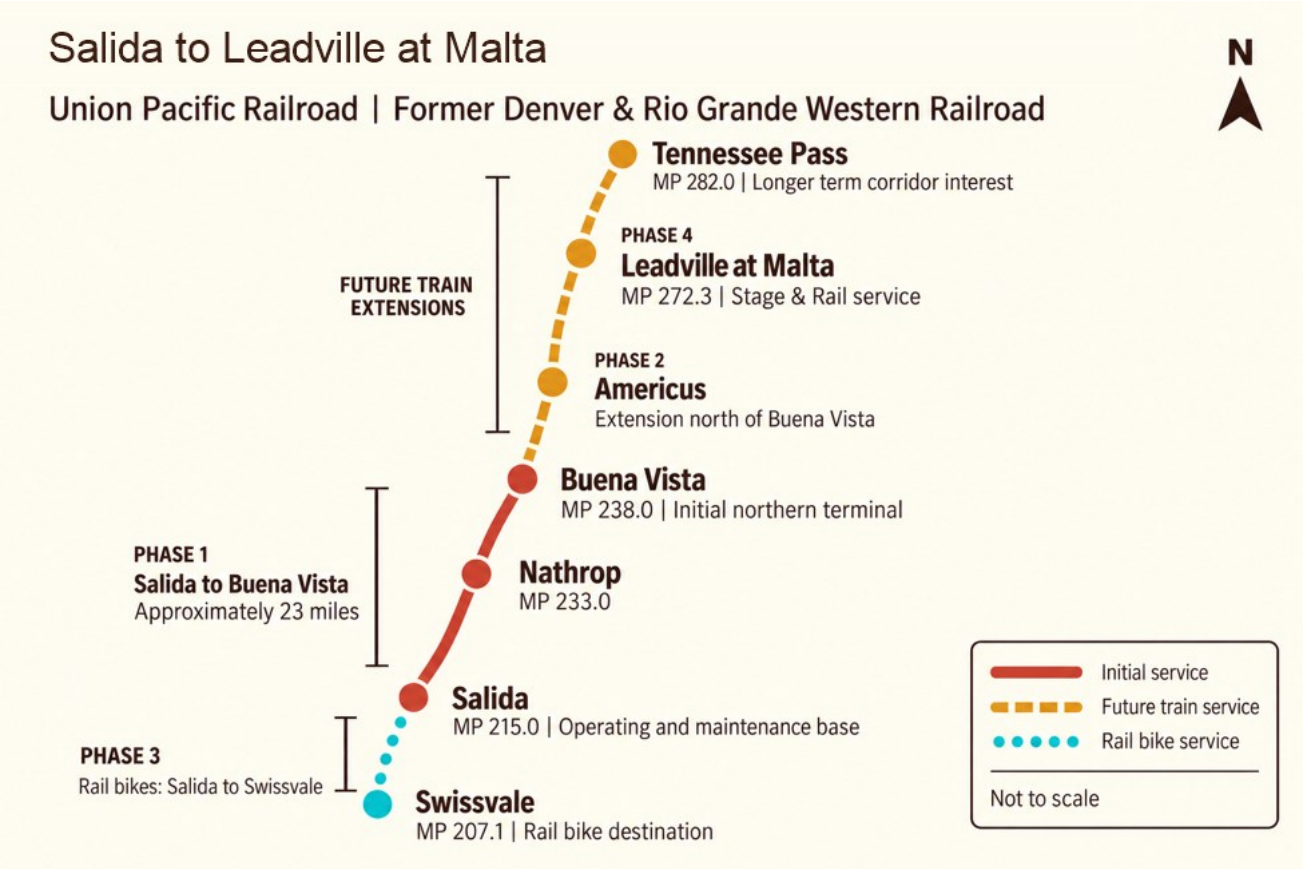
The broader proposal seeks a long-term lease covering approximately 82 miles of corridor, while concentrating initial investment on the Salida–Buena Vista segment.

Community and Recreational Partnerships

TPRL would serve both sightseeing passengers and people using the valley's trails, campgrounds, and river access points. Designated flag stops and equipment space for bicycles, kayaks, rafts, and other outdoor gear would support partnerships with local outfitters and recreation businesses.

The railroad would help connect existing portions of the Stage & Rail trail network and create opportunities for coordinated trips, community events, and partnerships with other Colorado tourist railroads. TPRL also proposes coordination with emergency responders for railroad safety training and potential access to remote portions of the corridor.

Union Pacific Tennessee Pass Line



Schematic map of the Union Pacific Railroad Tennessee Pass Line, formerly owned by the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad. Colors show proposed TPRL service phases on the existing railroad. Station spacing and line geometry are not to scale. Malta is the proposed rail destination near Leadville.

The Salida–Leadville corridor is the core long-term operating goal. Development would begin with the downtown-to-downtown Salida–Buena Vista service, then extend north as track rehabilitation, passenger facilities, agreements, and demand support the additional mileage. Americus and nearby recreation sites provide an intermediate expansion opportunity before service reaches Malta.

The proposal identifies approximately 55 miles between Salida and Leadville. Final mileage and running times would be confirmed during detailed operating planning. At Malta, existing sidings and a wye offer potential for equipment handling; a shuttle connection to Leadville and the Leadville Railroad would be explored.

Operating and Infrastructure Approach

The initial fleet would include two locomotives and three to five passenger cars, with a locomotive at each end to simplify terminal operations and provide redundancy. Salida would serve as the operating and maintenance base. Initial passenger facilities would use simple platforms, shelters, and ticket sales locations.

Restoration would focus on the infrastructure needed for the proposed service, including track, drainage, vegetation management, grade crossings, and property security. Mainline operations are proposed at speeds up to 30 mph with slower speeds in town, subject to verified infrastructure condition and applicable requirements. Detailed inspections and engineering would establish the actual rehabilitation scope and cost.

Longer-term facility goals include a replacement maintenance building in Salida and reconstruction of the historic Salida station as a railroad headquarters and community transportation hub.

Corridor Preservation and Local Benefits

Active rail use would establish a local presence responsible for inspections, routine maintenance, property security, and coordination with neighboring communities. TPRL would provide the equipment, management, supervision, and labor needed to support its operation, with responsibilities established through the lease and operating agreements.

The initial business is tourist rail service. The proposal does not seek to restore through freight traffic, and TPRL does not initially plan to become a common carrier. Potential local freight service would be considered separately if demand develops. Restoring the corridor will also enable the communities to retain an option for future regional passenger transportation, subject to separate planning and investment. This is smart planning.

Agreements Funding and Next Steps

A central requirement is securing a workable long-term agreement with Union Pacific. The agreement must support investment in the property, establish operating and maintenance responsibilities, and provide access for equipment deliveries.

TPRL anticipates significant private investment, supplemented by eligible public funding opportunities. Further development must establish capital and operating budgets, evaluate passenger demand, confirm regulatory requirements, and produce an implementation schedule.

The immediate request is to begin discussions toward a memorandum of understanding, coordinate authorized corridor assessments, and build support among CDOT, local governments, businesses, and residents.

TPRL offers a practical starting point for restoring rail activity in the Arkansas River Valley. Tourist service would bring active maintenance and local management back to the corridor while preserving opportunities for future passenger transportation and potential local freight service.

Downtown Community Perspective

Salida



Downtown Salida with Tenderfoot Mountain in the background. Source: Brew With A View; site photo credits Scott Peterson and Brandologie Design. Capture date not published.

Photo source

Buena Vista



Downtown Buena Vista in a non-winter streetscape. Source: Roads Less Traveled, September 2023 article.

Photo source

Track Pictures

The following photos are taken by the author that show typical current conditions of the proposal area. Despite no use for many years, the substantial track infrastructure is in remarkably good condition given the lack of maintenance. This is due to the southern orientation, heavy rail, dry conditions and gravelly well drained soils.



Looking north just outside of Salida beginning of Brown Canyon siding



Looking south near Swissvale. Much of the track is in outstanding condition generally



Looking south in Salida Yard



Looking north in Salida Yard



Atop Tenderfoot Mountain in Salida with the train yard and tracks in the foreground



Iron Bridge Rail Site north of BV



Looking south along the Arkansas River near Swissvale



Dragging Equipment Detector Wellsville

The bottom line:

This line is too important to lose. Please help TPRL in securing, maintaining and reopening this important and historic rail line once again, to serve Coloradan's and the region as it did for years before.

For questions contact:

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