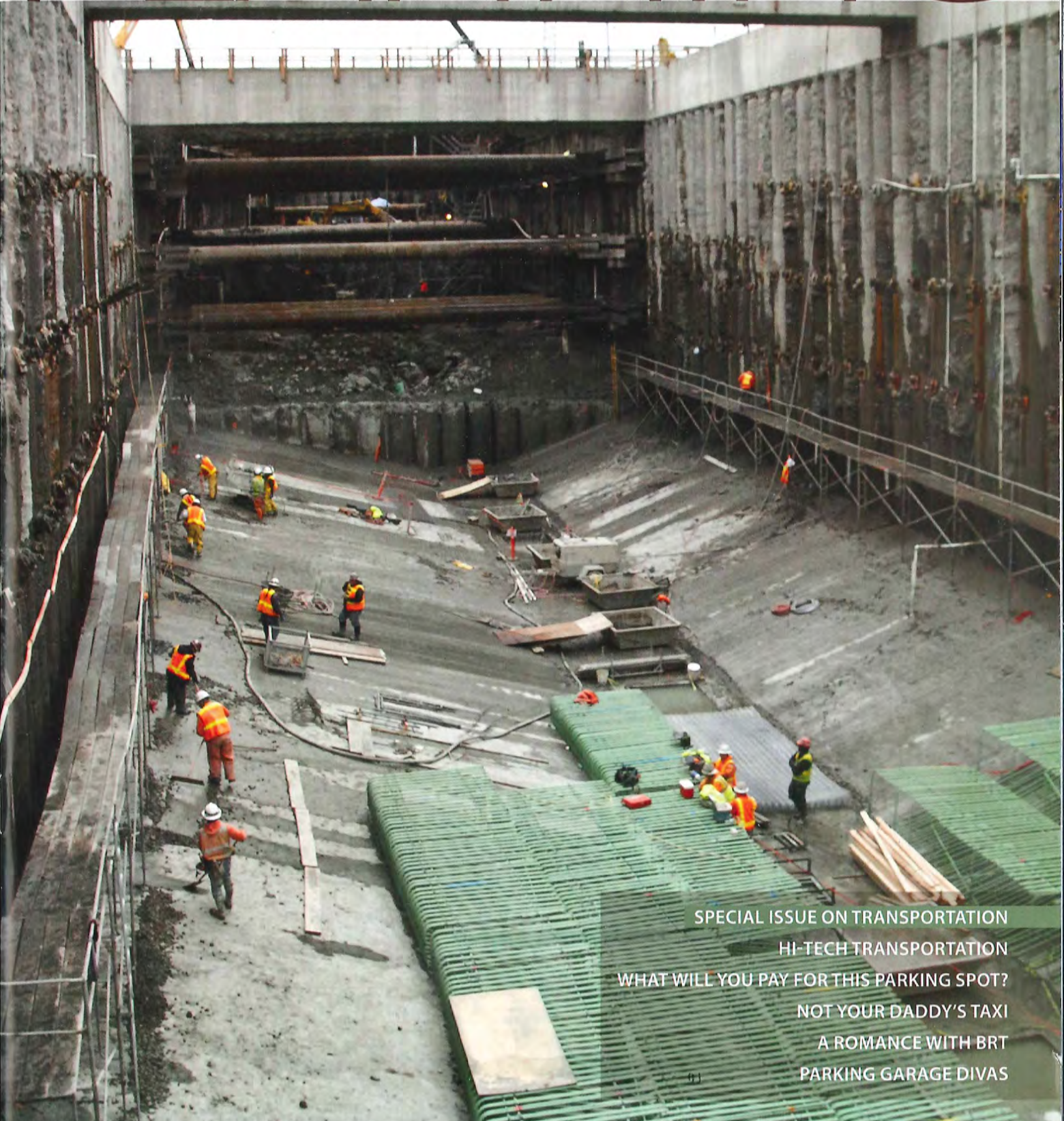


PLANNING



SPECIAL ISSUE ON TRANSPORTATION
HI-TECH TRANSPORTATION
WHAT WILL YOU PAY FOR THIS PARKING SPOT?
NOT YOUR DADDY'S TAXI
A ROMANCE WITH BRT
PARKING GARAGE DIVAS

First Tracks

Come September, the nation's first rural bus rapid transit system will begin operating in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley—a 40-mile corridor between Aspen and Glenwood Springs, where most of the area's major employers are based. Operated by the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, the system, called VelociRFTA, could have big benefits. Its speed, convenience, predictability, and special branding should win over "choice" riders—those who own a car but choose to ride the bus instead—easing traffic congestion and doubling ridership.

Currently, valley-wide bus schedules are tailored to the resorts' needs, which means that during peak winter and summer seasons, buses deliver resort workers to their destinations quickly and efficiently. For other commuters, though, the bus timing is awkward. Ashley Allis, a landscape architect with Aspen-based Design Workshop, Inc., won't take the bus if she has to work late because the 28-mile journey—a 30-minute car trip—can take almost 90 minutes by bus. "If I know I'll be working late or I'll have to transfer, I drive," she says.

This is precisely the situation that RFTA is trying to change, says RFTA CEO Dan Blankenship. He notes that in 2011 his system carried 4.14 million passengers—and that many workers have long commutes. "During the winter, we have hundreds of service people working in second homes and more than 2,500 Aspen Ski Company employees," he says. "We have snowy roads and bad driving conditions. There are a lot of reasons why people want to use transit, and what they want is a system that's convenient and efficient."

"RFTA's BRT may be the only one in the U.S. with a 40-mile-long corridor in an area with fewer than 50,000 people," says Wayne Feuerborn, AICB, HNTB's urban design and planning director and BRT project management team leader. Most systems operate at speeds of 20 mph in corridors of less than 10 miles and containing 40 to 50 stops. VelociRFTA will cover its route in about 45 minutes, traveling at speeds of up to 65 mph and stopping at



Source: VelociRFTA

Colorado's VelociRFTA stations are being designed with these elements: a shelter; information about the route, schedule, connections, and real-time "next bus" arrival time; bicycle racks; a ticket kiosk; Wi-Fi; and intelligent systems technology.

just nine stations. Each of the system's 19 new buses will run on compressed natural gas produced in Colorado.

For many years, light rail proponents pushed for a system that would operate along the former right-of-way of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. That effort lost momentum because of the \$300 million cost and the complexities of implementation. "Numerous factors have worked in our favor: limited parking in Aspen and Snowmass, rising fuel costs, and a couple of epic snow years," says Blankenship.

How it came about

Planning and design required a collaborative effort by planning, transportation, and public works staff from all five municipalities and the three counties that will benefit from this service. Sheri Sanzone, AICB, whose planning and design studio Bluegreen led the entitlements process in each jurisdiction, says that the design was vetted to make sure it worked with each jurisdiction's codes before land-use and building permit applications were submitted.

Priorities included the need to locate stops, stations, and park-and-rides in areas that were convenient to existing and future planned development, that bicycle parking and safe and comfortable bus shelters were provided, and that local transfers were efficient. Lighting was also a big issue because of dark sky initiatives and requirements. The team held public meetings throughout the valley.

Funding for the BRT came from the Federal Transit Administration's Very Small Starts Program, a matching grant program designed for corridor-based systems with a budget of under \$50



million. To date, the FTA has committed nearly \$25 million, about 54 percent of the total \$46.1 million project cost. The balance is being covered by a 0.04 cent additional sales tax approved by voters in the participating municipalities and two of the three counties involved.

The case for the bus

By car, the 40-mile drive between Aspen and Glenwood Springs takes an hour. Although BRT could save commuting time, RFTA also gave priority to bus travel lanes and multiple transit service priority elements, such as signal priority for transit buses and queue jump lanes. Bus-only lanes are using preexisting high-occupancy vehicle lanes. The Colorado Department of Transportation has been supportive, too, partly because it recognizes the difficulty of expanding State Highway 82.

The 19 new VelociRFTA buses will be equipped with Wi-Fi and AVL/CAD (automatic vehicle locating and computer aided dispatch), designed to ensure efficient service in the event of unusual congestion or a vehicle breakdown. Ticket kiosks and electronic fare collection will speed the boarding process, while real-time signs will indicate when the next bus will arrive.

Marketing the environmental benefits of riding the bus has been relatively easy. "Residents see transit as a green or sustainable component that is part of their everyday quality of life experience and expectation," says Feuerborn. ■

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