Transit for Tomorrow: Supporting a Sustainable Future

Aspen, Colorado, United State, United States of America
Aspen Chamber Resort Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Nature & Environment

Summary of Good Practice Story

Aspen, Colorado, a premier ski destination surrounded by the White River National Forest, has seen winters shrink by roughly a month over 30 years with another two weeks projected lost by 2050, directly threatening the snowpack and outdoor recreation that draw over 1 million visitors annually, while ground transportation accounts for 23% of the region's greenhouse gas emissions. The Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA), the largest rural transit agency in the US serving 5.1 million riders in 2025, adopted its first Climate Action Plan in 2023, committing to transition its entire bus and support-vehicle fleet to zero-emission vehicles by 2050 (already operating 8 battery-electric buses since 2020, with 11 more arriving in 2026), launching the fare-free "Flyer" pilot connecting key destinations directly, and funding bikeshare partner WE-cycle (whose ridership passed 300,000 in 2025, with 53% of rides connecting to RFTA bus stops) through its First Last Mile Mobility Reserve Fund. RFTA's plan is projected to displace over 500,000 metric tons of GHG emissions by 2050. The lesson: implementing climate initiatives is expensive, so building broad stakeholder collaboration and continuous public engagement is essential both to secure funding and to shift the behaviour — like choosing transit over a private car — that ultimately determines whether infrastructure investments succeed.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Aspen, Colorado, is nestled in the heart of the White River National Forest and surrounded by the peaks of the Elk Mountain Range in the central Rocky Mountains. Originally inhabited by the Ute people, Aspen became a mining town during the silver boom of the late 1800s. By the late 1940s, the Aspen Idea was born, making Aspen a destination for nurturing the mind, body, and spirit and shaping its identity for years to come.

Today, Aspen is home to 6,500 people and is known for its breathtaking natural beauty and unique blend of outdoor adventure and arts and culture. While Aspen is a world-renowned ski destination, the region offers a diverse range of outdoor activities. The area is home to hundreds of miles of hiking and biking trails, the iconic Maroon Bells, Gold Medal fly fishing waters, and more. From summer evenings on the trails to lunchtime laps on Aspen Mountain, the outdoors are a way of life for locals, a place to reset, build connections, and do what they love. Outdoor recreation is also a top travel motivator, helping draw over 1 million visitors to Aspen each year and playing an important role in the local economy. The mountains, rivers, and landscapes are among Aspen's greatest assets, making it a special place to live, work, and play, and imperative to protect.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
As a premier ski resort, Aspen draws people from around the world, making tourism an important economic driver. Greenhouse gases threaten the features that attract tourists by trapping heat in the atmosphere. Compared to 30 years ago, our winters are effectively a month shorter, and we are projected to lose another two weeks by 2050, leading to droughts, wildfire risk, and reduced snowpack. Last winter, Aspen experienced unprecedented warm temperatures, resulting in low snowpack and difficult ski conditions. Local businesses felt the impacts, with many attributing the lack of snow to declines in business and expressing a shared sentiment: "Everyone is just hoping and praying for more storms and more powder. We are all just holding on to hope." Low snowpack and a nationwide decline in international visitation led to lower YOY occupancy rates in Aspen last winter, demonstrating how the state of our environment directly impacts tourism and the local economy.

Ground transportation is one of the two biggest sources of emissions in Aspen, accounting for 23% of total GHGs. The rural nature of the region causes higher vehicle miles traveled than national and state averages. Furthermore, Aspen faces an affordable housing crisis, driving workers to live in more affordable regions and commute to their jobs. As a result, heavy traffic during peak hours leads to even longer commutes, negatively impacting quality of life and endangering what makes Aspen unique, its natural environment.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Founded and headquartered in Aspen, Colorado, the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) provides transit and multimodal services across a 70-mile region and served over 5.1

million riders in 2025, making it the largest rural transit agency in the United States. As a transit leader and sustainability innovator, RFTA and its Board of Directors recognized the growing impact of climate change in the region. To address transportation-related emissions and maintain a healthy and sustainable environment for residents and visitors, RFTA adopted its first Climate Action Plan (CAP) in 2023.

RFTA's Climate Action Plan uses data from 2019 (baseline year) to identify achievable strategies and set goals for reducing emissions. RFTA aims to reduce agency-controlled GHGs 50% by 2030 and 90% by 2050. RFTA is also striving to reduce transportation-related emissions by increasing emissions offset compared to emissions produced in 2019 to 5x by 2050. To accomplish this, RFTA will target three main categories: emissions from RFTA fleets, emissions from RFTA facilities, and displacing regional emissions. RFTA's substantial effort will help improve residents' quality of life, protect economic vitality, and preserve the environment.

The Journey: How change happened

RFTA's climate work is extensive; the strategies below are just a few ways RFTA is making a difference in the communities it serves.

During climate action planning, staff learned that 76% of RFTA's directly owned emissions come from its fleet. Therefore, prioritizing a transition to zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) is the most impactful way to reduce GHG emissions. To plan the transition, RFTA evaluated battery electric buses (BEBs) and fuel cell electric buses (FCEBs), while also considering existing infrastructure capabilities and charging strategies. In 2024, RFTA adopted the Zero Emission Fleet Transition Plan, a commitment to transitioning both revenue (bus) and non-revenue (support vehicles) to 100% ZEVs by 2050. Stakeholders expressed enthusiasm about the transition: "Now we get an opportunity for our community to experience less noise pollution, lower emissions and mitigation for climate change." (George Newman). This initiative will both enhance quality of life and protect the environment.

Besides reducing emissions within its operations, RFTA will offset emissions by increasing ridership and enhancing alternative transportation modes, reducing the number of vehicles on the road. After identifying the need for direct transportation to key destinations, RFTA announced a new fare-free, 2-year pilot called The Flyer. Using battery electric buses, The Flyer will operate during peak hours, improving access from the Brush Creek Park & Ride to local schools, places of work, and heavily visited recreational areas. Currently, commuters must take the bus to another RFTA hub before taking a different shuttle to their destination. The increased convenience will make riding RFTA more comparable to a personal vehicle, incentivizing a shift to public transit and alleviating congestion. Throughout the program, RFTA will evaluate demand, travel patterns, and long-term viability. RFTA remains nimble and adapts to the changing needs of the region and visitors to grow ridership, reducing the number of vehicles on the road and emissions.

Additionally, a decrease of 1% in fare prices can result in a 0.5% increase in ridership. While it may seem small, daily commutes amount to hundreds or thousands of trips each year, and shifting to public transit significantly reduces emissions and improves traffic flow. To test the feasibility and impact of free fares, RFTA launched a fare-free pilot program from October 1 to November 30, 2025. A survey of 800 passengers found that 16% of riders would have driven if fares had applied, and more than half of those would have driven alone. While successful, a permanent fare-free model poses financial challenges, leading RFTA to explore updated pass offerings and restructured fares to incentivize ridership.

Expanding first-last mile options will improve access to stations, increase ridership, and encourage the use of greener alternatives. RFTA has already improved the Rio Grande Trail, a non-motorized commuting and recreational trail, and constructed a grade-separated pedestrian/bicycle crossing. RFTA also partners with WE-cycle, a local nonprofit that provides on-demand bikeshare across the Roaring Fork Valley. WE-cycle began in 2013 in Aspen, becoming the first bikeshare in North America outside of a metropolitan area. Its early success paved the way for continued growth, and it has since expanded into 6 communities. While RFTA and WE-cycle have partnered since the beginning, RFTA was able to dedicate funding toward bikeshare through the passing of the Destination 2040 ballot measure in 2018. RFTA and WE-cycle have inspired others to support the movement and today, RFTA helps fund the bikeshare. In 2025, WE-cycle ridership surpassed 300,000 riders, with 53% of all bikeshare rides going to or from RFTA bus stops. WE-cycle has also seen a 184.7% increase in rides since the partnership. RFTA and WE-cycle combine their strengths to reduce emissions, traffic congestion, and parking challenges.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

RFTA has already made progress on its climate action goals by operating 8 battery electric buses (BEBs) since 2020, with 11 additional BEBs arriving in 2026. This year, RFTA will make headway on several other critical projects, including facility charging infrastructure, regional bus service expansion, and vehicle electrification planning. RFTA has been successful in increasing ridership to pre-pandemic levels, driving a shift from personal vehicles to public transit. Looking ahead, the initiatives in RFTA's CAP are expected to reduce or displace over 500,000 metric tons of GHG emissions by 2050, equivalent to the annual energy usage of 231,000 homes. This substantial impact will help protect the environment that defines Aspen for years to come.

RFTA's efforts have already improved the communities it serves. Stakeholders have noted the importance of RFTA's work: "Systems like the Summit Stage and the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) have shown that frequent, reliable and often free public transportation moves millions of people efficiently between lodging, lifts and town centers. For visitors, it removes the stress of driving and parking. For workers, it provides a lifeline — especially in places where housing costs push employees far from where they work…Ski towns

depend on clean air, natural beauty and reliable winter conditions. Yet transportation emissions from thousands of individual vehicles directly undermine those assets. Investing in transit reduces congestion, lowers emissions and helps preserve the very landscapes that draw people in the first place." (Margaret Bowes). RFTA's climate initiatives are positively impacting residents and visitors and will continue to play a critical role in protecting what makes Aspen a special place, the outdoors.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Implementing climate initiatives is costly, making funding a challenge. RFTA's climate strategies require significant financial commitments. RFTA is fortunate to operate in a region that prioritizes sustainability and has been awarded major grants from regional, state, and federal agencies. Collaboration and careful planning are key to making projects financially feasible. RFTA has worked closely with stakeholders, seeking input from riders, staff, climate leaders, local governments, and more, to create their Climate Action Plan. The depth of collaboration and analysis enabled RFTA leaders to communicate the importance of the projects to officials and secure funding.

Additionally, implementing key strategies, such as increasing ridership, is heavily dependent on the actions of stakeholders. RFTA needs to communicate effectively and spread awareness within the community. RFTA has created a Public Involvement Plan, which serves as a guide for sharing information and engaging with people in the region. By engaging with stakeholders through meetings, surveys, and social media, among other channels, RFTA can adapt to meet community needs and promote new initiatives. Furthermore, the Aspen Chamber Resort Association (ACRA), a hybrid chamber of commerce and destination marketing organization, and RFTA partner, offering reduced fares to ACRA member businesses to incentivize ridership among employees. Direct communication and partnerships are key to achieving climate goals.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

RFTA's climate work has inspired other sustainable modes of transportation. In 2021, the RFTA Board of Directors established the First Last Mile Mobility Reserve (FLMMR) Fund to support the development of micromobility projects. This provides funding to RFTA member jurisdictions for first-last mile pilot projects, including bikeshare, on-demand transportation, and infrastructure projects. Along with supporting WE-cycle, our local bikeshare program, the fund has contributed to Basalt Connect and The Downtowner, which provide free, on-demand, sustainable ride-sharing services within city limits. Carbondale trustee, Colin Laird, noted that the town's share of the FLMMR investment is 5% of its entire budget. The Carbondale Downtowner would cost 10% of the town's budget without RFTA's contribution, making it financially infeasible. Similarly, WE-Cycle co-founder, Mirte Mallory, expressed the importance of RFTA's investment: "This is truly a watershed moment for WE-cycle! Thanks to RFTA's investment and partnership, WE-cycle will be able to magnify its impact and build upon, and accelerate, a movement which our funders,

team, and riders have propelled into motion." RFTA's commitment to protecting the environment has supported and inspired impactful initiatives beyond its own.

Awards or Certifications
Recognized as a Climate Champion by the Federal Transit Administration: https://www.rfta.com/rfta-recognized-as-climate-champion-by-federal-transit-administration/

Recognized for leadership in energy efficiency by the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project (SWEEP): https://www.swenergy.org/sweep-energy-efficiency-awards-2025/

Web Articles
https://www.rfta.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RFTA_2023-Climate-Action-Plan_Final_20230531.pdf

https://www.rfta.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Zero-Emission-Fleet-Transition-Plan-7-11-24.pdf

https://aspenchamber.imagerelay.com/share/3b6ae993b9b34e97abce7a0b37329059

https://www.rfta.com/2040roadmap/

https://www.rfta.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RFTA-Public-Involvement-Plan-2023.pdf

https://www.aspendailynews.com/news/rfta-gets-grant-for-10-electric-buses/article_d2005826-6ce2-11ef-bc06-abadaa63f38b.html

https://www.aspenpublicradio.org/community/2026-01-13/rfta-ridership-increases-36-during-fare-free-pilot

https://www.aspentimes.com/news/rftas-new-service-will-connect-brush-creek-park-ride-with-maroon-castle-creeks/

https://www.rfta.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/First-and-Last-Mile-Mobility-Policy-08.08.2024.pdf

https://soprissun.com/rfta-report-budget-first-and-last-mile-mobility-employee-support/

https://www.rfta.com/public-documents/climate-action-plan/

https://www.aspentimes.com/news/pitkin-county-labor-earning-demographics-contribute-to-tight-housing-market/

https://aspen.gov/DocumentCenter/View/14917/2023-Aspen-Community-Wide-Greenhouse-Gas-Inventory-Summary-PDF

https://www.aspentimes.com/news/aspen-ones-ceo-dave-tanner-gives-update-on-state-of-the-business/

https://www.aspendailynews.com/news/just-holding-on-to-hope/article_f4097fe4-6802-4bb5-8fc6-7c87ee83a3f8.html

https://aspenchamber.org/membership/data-center/occupancy/

https://www.aspentimes.com/news/cleaner-quieter-rfta-buses-will-go-into-service-around-aspen-around-thanksgiving/

https://www.aspentimes.com/news/great-outdoors-month-why-ski-towns-cant-afford-to-ignore-transit/

Other Relevant Links

Quotes or Testimonials

“Every day, RFTA shows how transit can support the economy, mitigate housing affordability challenges, and improve everyone’s quality of life,” said Travis Madsen, SWEEP’s Transportation Program Director. “RFTA’s work to provide convenient, fast, affordable, efficient, and clean mobility service stands out as an example that communities all across the country can look to for inspiration.” (SWEEP)

- Travis Madsen, Southwest Energy Efficiency Project Transportation Program Director

“With 30+ years of transit experience, RFTA is at an exciting moment of growth as an organization. The Board, Executive Team and Staff are eager and ready to evolve alongside the region to provide transit and multimodal solutions that meet agency goals, reduce GHG emissions and improve the overall quality of life for residents and visitors.”

- Jason White, RFTA Sustainability Coordinator

“Systems like the Summit Stage and the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) have shown that frequent, reliable and often free public transportation moves millions of people efficiently between lodging, lifts and town centers. For visitors, it removes the stress of driving and parking. For workers, it provides a lifeline — especially in places where housing costs push

employees far from where they work… Ski towns depend on clean air, natural beauty and reliable winter conditions. Yet transportation emissions from thousands of individual vehicles directly undermine those assets. Investing in transit reduces congestion, lowers emissions and helps preserve the very landscapes that draw people in the first place." (Aspen Times)

- Margaret Bowes, Executive Director of Colorado Association of Ski Towns

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- Mirte Mallory, WE-Cycle Co-Founder