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## Can Westerners be wooed from their cars?

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People want options and convenience.

In the automobile-loving West, that's the explanation local officials give for the growth of transit systems in states like Colorado, Arizona and Utah. While those rail systems haven't met the test of time like New York's subway system, statistics show that Westerners can be enticed from their cars.

People are riding light rail, they're willing to pay to expand it and they want to build alongside it.

Since opening in 1999, ridership on Salt Lake County's TRAX light-rail system has more than tripled, reaching an average of 57,500 passengers each weekday last year.



"People are not in love with their cars as much as they are in love with good transportation," said John English, general manager of the Utah Transit Authority. "If people are so in love with their cars, why are they riding TRAX? The point is, people will give up the automobile if they find an alternative that matches the automobile in quality."

Cities that fought against the first TRAX line are now planning transit-oriented developments and paying cash to help get light rail to their town. Kennecott Land and four cities along the proposed Mid-Jordan TRAX line each paid about \$400,000 to help UTA finish environmental studies of the line.

West Valley City gave about \$1.5 million to help pay for environmental studies of the proposed West Valley TRAX line.

"I was one of the naysayers when they were building the north-south TRAX line," said Dennis Nordfelt, mayor of West Valley. "I said the use does not justify the cost. I have had to eat crow, and quite frankly, it doesn't taste too bad."

Like Utah, building a first rail line in Denver was critical in getting residents to buy into the idea of mass transit, said Elizabeth Rao, assistant general manager of planning and development for the Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD). They rode it at first because of the novelty, then continued riding based on a good first experience.

In 2004, voters in the Denver metro area agreed to a sales tax hike to build 119 miles of new rail and 31 new park-n-ride lots. Denver business leaders said that has sparked an interest in

the city from companies that like the promise of new travel options.

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