

Policy Memo: First Mile Free's Two-in-One Solution for Mode Shift

To: Greater Denver Transit (GDT)

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In Brief

The City of Denver is smart to focus on mode shift—it's the key to cleaner air, lower emissions, and a more connected and vibrant city. But 75% of residents live beyond easy walking distance to transit¹, and **39% cite access as their biggest barrier**².

First Mile Free directly closes this gap by making both micromobility and public transit more accessible—**driving mode shift on two fronts**. By covering the first mile of e-bike and scooter trips ending at approved transit stops, the program ensures a seamless, affordable connection to transit. Unlike traditional subsidies, it's automatic—no applications, no extra steps. Riders simply pick up a bike or scooter, park at transit, and the discount applies instantly.

Problem Statement

Denver's transit system isn't reaching its full potential because too many residents lack a reliable way to reach it. Micromobility exists but isn't integrated into transit, and without public funding, it remains costly and unreliable. As a result, many low-income and transit-dependent residents are left without viable transportation options. The outcome? More cars, higher commute costs, and longer travel times—all undermining mode shift goals. Without a first-mile solution, residents will keep driving instead of choosing more sustainable options.

¹ Denver Moves Everyone, 2023

² Corona Insights, 2022

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Analysis of Options

| Policy Option | Mode Shift Impact | Cost Efficiency | Equity & Affordability | Additional Benefits |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Status Quo (No Changes Made) | Low – transit access remains a barrier | \$0 spent, but no new riders | No targeted affordability improvements | No impact on emissions, traffic, or safety |
| Subsidized First Mile Free | High – covers 20K trips to transit per \$100K | Highly efficient – ~\$5 per first-mile | Expands access to lower-income riders | Cuts commute times, reduces emissions by 59% per ride, clears sidewalks |
| Expanding RTD Shuttle Service | Moderate – limited reach | Expensive – high operational costs | Some impact in specific areas | Higher costs, requires new infrastructure |

Findings: The First Mile Free model is the **most cost-effective, scalable, and immediate solution** to improve transit access while delivering multiple citywide benefits.

Recommendation & Action Plan

- Fund First Mile Free with **\$100K–\$300K to cover 20,000–60,000 trips³**, with potential public-private partnerships to reduce costs.
- Roll out strategically—either **citywide or incrementally** (starting with key Opportunity Areas or focusing on rail stations first).
- Track ridership impact and evaluate **expansion based on mode shift KPIs**

Expected Outcomes

- **More Mode Shift** – Pays for 20K first-mile micromobility trips, driving transit ridership.
- **Lower Emissions** – Cuts CO₂ by 59% per ride vs. personal vehicles³.
- **Less Traffic, Cleaner Air** – Reduces car trips, cutting congestion and tire and brake dust pollution.
- **Faster, Cheaper Commutes** – Halves commute times (vs. walking to transit)³, lowers costs, and expands access for low-income residents
- **Safer, Clearer Streets** – Keeps scooters at transit stops, reducing clutter; encourages shorter, safer trips.
- **Stronger Citywide Connections** – Enhances multimodal network, retail foot traffic, and neighborhood cohesion.

First Mile Free would make **Denver the first city to integrate e-bikes and scooters into transit** in this way. By making the first mile effortless and free, it drives mode shift on two fronts—boosting both micromobility and transit use. First Mile Free means fewer cars, cleaner air, faster commutes, and safer streets—all through a simple, scalable solution that maximizes existing infrastructure.

³ Cox, 2025 (Research Available Upon Request)