2026 Call for Projects - Partnership Program

Partnership Program Purpose

RTD established the Partnership Program in 2023 to leverage RTD and local funding to provide additional services that meet a community's mobility needs. The program provides clarity to external stakeholders on how to approach RTD for partnerships by establishing a standardized intake process. Additionally, the program establishes a means to evaluate partnerships after they are implemented, ensuring funding is being spent effectively through performance specifications.

2026 Call for Projects Details

Overview

This document serves as RTD's 2026 Call for Projects for the Partnership Program. This Call for Projects allows local governments and Transportation Management Associations/Organizations (TMAs/TMOs) to apply for RTD partnership funding. Other non-profits and non-governmental organizations who are interested in 2026 Partnership Program funding should partner with an eligible organization. Applicants will need to fill out the application form to apply for funds, and each Subregional Service Council will prioritize projects submitted from their subregion.

RTD has been purposefully vague about project eligibility, as the intent of the program is to allow for innovative ideas and to not disqualify potential projects from funding. As the intent of the Partnership Program is transit deployment or other mobility services operated outside of RTD, ineligible project types include infrastructure investment and educational programs. If your project proposes planning or construction of any physical infrastructure, it will be deemed ineligible. Additionally, projects that seek the provision or expansion of RTD services identified in the System Optimization Plan (SOP) are not eligible for funding.

In general, no more than 30% of program funding can be allocated to any one Subregional Service Council. However, percentages may be adjusted depending on the number of Subregional Service Councils that submit viable projects.

Important Dates

April 1	2026 Call for Projects and associated application materials released
April 6, 11 a.m.	Virtual Q&A session (link to meeting here) for interested applicants
April 29, 5 p.m.	Applications due to RTD
May 29	RTD staff complete initial scoring prior to Subregional Service Council prioritization
June 1-12	Subregional Service Councils prioritize submitted projects and select a representative to participate on the Selection Committee
June 12	RTD staff finalize scores of all submitted projects
June 19	Selection Committee meets to develop final funding recommendation
July 15	RTD announces selected projects

July – December 2026	RTD and project sponsors execute IGAs and project sponsor issues RFP (if necessary)
2027	New projects launch

Eligible Applicants

- Local governments within the RTD district
- TMAs/TMOs within the RTD district

Eligible Projects

All projects must be solely within the RTD district. Any project occurring outside of the RTD district is ineligible. Eligible project types include:

- Fixed-route transit service – service operating on a specific route
- On-demand transit service – demand-responsive service operating in a specific area
- Other mobility service – service that does not fall into the above two categories
- Other – project that does not provide service, but enhances mobility through other means

Note that planning or construction of infrastructure, fare-buy ups, and projects that seek the provision or expansion of RTD services identified in the System Optimization Plan (SOP) are ineligible for RTD partnership funding. Additionally, educational or travel training programs as well as studies or plans are not eligible for funding. Projects must either deploy mobility services or be directly tied to enhancing utilization of an existing, active mobility service. Fare buy-up requests will be processed separately in 2026.

Vehicle Purchases

Projects can either be bid as turnkey to a competitively-selected contractor or the project sponsor will need to own the vehicle outright and provide the vehicle to the selected contractor for operation and maintenance. Any project sponsor asking for funding to purchase vehicles will need to adhere to federal regulations in order to obtain funding. Contractors will not be allowed to own vehicles utilizing Partnership Program funding.

Funding

There is $6 million annually available for the 2026 Call for Projects, and RTD will commit up to three years of funding, with a start date of 2027. Applicants can request funding for one year, two years, or three years, depending on project needs. The table below shows the amount of funding available by year for projects submitted in this Call. Note that additional funding may be made available in future years, subject to RTD's budgeting process. Future funding will be allocated through a future Call for Projects. Applicants cannot request more than $1.8 million annually in RTD funding.

Year	Available Funding	Maximum Project Request
2027	$6 million	$1.8 million
2028	$6 million	$1.8 million
2029	$6 million	$1.8 million

Local Match

All applicants will be expected to provide a minimum of 20% local match. The local match must be cash; in-kind match and/or reimbursement for staff time is not eligible.

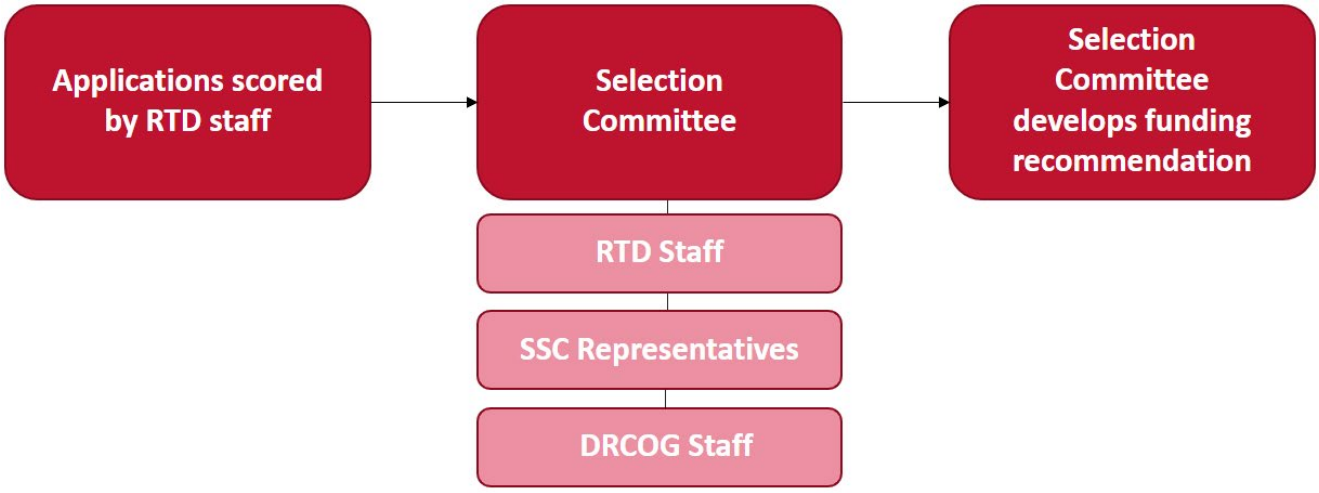
Instructions

Applicants should complete the attached application form and submit the form and associated materials to RTD via the RTD application portal by 5p.m. MDT on April 29, 2026. RTD will host a virtual Q&A session at 11 a.m. on April 6, 2026 for those who have questions on the application and/or the process. A link to the Microsoft Teams meeting can be found here. Please reach out to Cory Schmitt (cory.schmitt@rtd-denver.com) if you need additional technical assistance.

2026 Project Selection

In 2026, the process to select projects and develop funding recommendations will be a two-step process.

First, a group of RTD staff will score all submitted applications based on the scoring rubric on page 6. After scoring the projects, a selection committee will be convened. The selection committee will be made up of RTD staff as well as one representative from each Subregional Service Council and a member of DRCOG staff. The selection committee will take into account project scores as well as prioritization from the Subregional Service Councils to develop a final funding recommendation.



2026 Project Selection Criteria
The following is the detailed project selection criteria:

Alignment with RTD's Strategic Plan
The Partnership Program seeks to enhance two Strategic Plan priorities – Community Value and Customer Excellence.

Community Value: *RTD strives to be a strong and valued community partner*.

Selected projects will demonstrate increased value to their community and will highlight partnership between the selected project sponsor and RTD.

Customer Excellence: *RTD strives to consistently deliver high-quality customer service*.
Selected projects will bring additional value to customers, while meeting their mobility needs.

Local support and ability to meet local needs
In June after all applications are received and given preliminary scores by the Evaluation Panel, each Subregional Service Council will meet to prioritize projects if more than one project is submitted from that subregion. Through this process, Subregional Service Councils have the opportunity to highlight projects that will best meet the mobility needs of their subregion. Applicants should plan to give a brief overview of their project to the Subregional Service Council at the June meeting utilizing the provided slide template. The prioritization from each Subregional Service Council will be used by the Selection Committee to determine a final funding recommendation.

Complements existing RTD services
RTD provides robust regional connections, but many areas of the District lack first and last mile connections. Projects scoring highly in this category will improve access to RTD's existing services.

Provides service where there is a gap in existing service
RTD has a large District, and some areas of the 2,342-square mile District do not currently have service, or lack service necessary to meet residents' or employees' needs. Projects scoring highly in this category will provide service to areas that lack service needed to meet the mobility needs of individuals in the area.

Provides service to equity populations
Equity is a core principle of RTD's functional mission to provide public transit service in the Denver Region. Projects scoring highly in this category will improve mobility for low-income and minority populations.

Potential ridership
RTD staff will use information from each application to evaluate the potential ridership a service might generate. RTD staff will take a data-driven approach to evaluate potential ridership; the greater density of people and jobs, the larger potential there is for ridership.

Project readiness
RTD intends to fund "shovel-ready" projects. Applicants who demonstrate a high degree of project readiness will have conducted the necessary planning to understand the work required to deliver the project on time. Additionally, applicants who have managed similar past projects, or projects of similar complexity, will score highly. Applicants who demonstrate that local match is committed to the project will score higher than those with local match that is contingent upon other factors (e.g. winning another grant, receiving budget approvals). Applicants should have adequate staffing to support project implementation.

Project Scoring Rubric – 2026 Cycle

Selection Criteria	Weight	High (3 points)	Medium (2 points)	Low (1 point)
Alignment with RTD's Strategic Plan	10%	The project demonstrates **strong** alignment with the two Strategic Plan priorities that the Partnership Program seeks to enhance – Community Value and Customer Excellence	The project demonstrates **moderate** alignment with the two Strategic Plan priorities that the Partnership Program seeks to enhance – Community Value and Customer Excellence	The project demonstrates **weak** alignment with the two Strategic Plan priorities that the Partnership Program seeks to enhance – Community Value and Customer Excellence
Local support and ability to meet local needs	20%	The project was prioritized **first** by the applicant's Subregional Service Council	The project was prioritized **second** by the applicant's Subregional Service Council	The project was prioritized **third or lower** by the applicant's Subregional Service Council
Complements existing RTD services	10%	The project provides a first-last mile connection to **frequent** (15 minutes or less) RTD service	The project provides a first-last mile connection to **semi-frequent** (16-59 minutes) RTD service	The project provides a first-last mile connection to **infrequent** (60 minutes or more) RTD service
Provides service where there is a gap in existing service	10%	The project implements a service that provides mobility in an area that has **no** RTD service	The project implements a service that provides mobility in an area that has **some** RTD service	The project implements a service that provides mobility in an area that has **ample** RTD service
Provides service to equity populations (from DRCOG data tool)	15%	Relative to other submitted projects, the project will provide service to a **larger** number of individuals of color and low-income households	Relative to other submitted projects, the project will provide service to a **medium** number of individuals of color and low-income households	Relative to other submitted projects, the project will provide service to a **lower** number of individuals of color and low-income households
Potential ridership	15%	Relative to other submitted projects, the density of population and jobs in the service area is **higher**	Relative to other submitted projects, the density of population and jobs in the service area is **medium**	Relative to other submitted projects, the density of population and jobs in the service area is **lower**
Project readiness	20%	Applicant demonstrates a **strong** ability to deliver project on time as well as manage ongoing operations of the project. Applicant has managed similar past projects or conducted enough planning to **fully** understand work required to implement. **Applicant has staffing necessary to support project implementation**	Applicant demonstrates a **medium** ability to deliver project on time as well as manage ongoing operations of the project. While applicant may not have managed similar past projects, applicant has conducted enough planning to **fully** understand work required to implement. **Applicant has staffing necessary to support project implementation**	Applicant demonstrates a **low** ability to deliver project on time as well as manage ongoing operations of the project. Applicant has not managed similar past projects, however, applicant has conducted **some** planning to understand work required to implement. **Applicant does not have staffing necessary to support project implementation**

Information for Successful Applicants
Applicants and RTD will need to execute intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) or funding agreements with each applicant prior to procurement and project launch. The IGAs will detail project requirements, outline the amount of funding that is being provided, and clarify commitments from RTD and the applicant. Additionally, RTD will help the applicant finalize any details of their project needed to advance the project to procurement.

Performance Expectations
Selected projects deploying fixed route or on-demand services will be required to meet performance metrics that align with the "Community" category in RTD's service standards. For the 2026 Call for Projects, selected projects will be expected to have at least two boardings per hour for on-demand services and 10 boardings per hour for fixed route services. Fixed route and demand response projects will also target compliance with additional performance metrics reflective of RTD's service standards as described below.

Performance Expectations – 2026 Cycle

Project Type	Evaluation Metric	Performance Expectation	Required/Target
Fixed Route	Boardings/Service Hour	10 boardings/hour	Required
	On-Time Performance	85%	
	Rolling Stock Reliability	80%	
	Cost/Boarding	*$14/boarding*	*Target*
	Service Availability	*98%*	
	Preventable Accidents	*<2 per 5,000 service miles*	
	Customer Experience	*<5 negative customer comments per 1,000 boardings*	
On-Demand	Boardings/Service Hour	2.0 boardings/hour	Required
	Wait Time	50% of trips wait time <30 minutes	
	Rolling Stock Reliability	80%	
	Cost/Boarding	*$30/boarding*	*Target*
	Preventable Accidents	*<2 per 5,000 service miles*	
	Customer Experience	*<5 negative customer comments per 1,000 boardings*	

Projects that do not fall into these two categories will have performance metrics developed on a case-by-case basis to be assessed.

Procurement
Selected applicants will be required to go through a competitive procurement process to select a mobility provider for any new service under the oversight of RTD's Contracting and Procurement division. Applicants that do not have an existing procurement policy and/or standards in place will receive more oversight from RTD's Contracting and Procurement division than applicants that do. RTD will provide guidance on items to include in the contract. At a minimum, a selected operator will need to meet federal drug and alcohol screening requirements, conduct criminal background checks for operators, meet applicable Title VI regulations, provide ADA accessible vehicles, and meet RTD's hiring and training requirements for operators. If an applicant chooses to include federal funding as part of the project, additional items above and beyond the aforementioned requirements will be needed.

Evaluation
At the end of each year, existing partnerships will be assessed based on performance metrics; fixed route and

on-demand projects will be expected to meet the minimum service standards for the "Community" service category, as determined by Service Development performance metrics. These metrics (identified above) will be included in the IGA executed with the applicant. RTD will conduct this assessment and make recommendations on how to improve performance for services that are not meeting metrics. While performance assessments will occur annually for every project, projects will not be expected to meet metrics after the first year of operation; however, applicants will be expected to work with RTD staff on ways to address underperforming service. Additionally, RTD will not withdraw previously committed funding due to poor performance. Services that do not meet performance metrics are at risk of losing RTD funding after the initial funding commitment has been exhausted. Additionally, continuation of a project after the initial funding period is not guaranteed and will be contingent on available funding and project performance.