



## **Bus rapid transit making inroads**

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It may be difficult for progressive trailblazing Bay Area leaders to stomach, but they're learning a lesson from Los Angeles about public transportation.

That lesson is called bus rapid transit and it's on the lips of transportation officials from the marble halls of Washington, D.C., to the dirt-paved slums of South America. The place it seems to work phenomenally well is through the sun-soaked autopolis of L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. The Orange Line, as it is known, uses natural-gas powered buses along an exclusive busway, with limited stops and passengers paying before they board to speed loading and unloading. With stations rather than mere stops, it resembles some of San Jose's light rail lines, only without the rails or streetcars.

"The Orange Line in Los Angeles is really one of the first full BRT systems to open in the country," explained Bill Vincent, who runs the Bus Rapid Transit program for the D.C.-based environmental nonprofit Breakthrough Technologies Group. "It has been remarkably successful; it was projected to carry 22,000 daily riders in the year 2020 and it achieved that number within the first six months or so, so it completely blew away expectations."

While the Bay Area, with BART, Muni and

two dozen other transit agencies, might have higher expectations of public transportation, AC Transit is betting it can make this international phenomenon work in the East Bay.

The East Bay bus agency is gearing up for a series of hearings this month for its proposed 1 Line service, designated after the old Key System trolleys that ran between Berkeley, Oakland and San Leandro on the same route along Telegraph Avenue and East 14th Street (now International Boulevard in Oakland).

While AC Transit has been talking about the idea since the 1980s and working on it in earnest since 1999, "the whole idea has really come of age in America," said Chris Peebles, who has served on AC Transit's governing board since the project began.

Bus rapid transit is unique among transportation alternatives.

Priorities often divide decision-makers along ideological lines.

Liberals push for mass transit, conservatives seek highway funding; advocates for the poor agitate for more bus service for those who can't afford cars, while environmentalists lobby for expensive new railways to coax SUV owners off suburban freeways.

BRT seems to have united some of those competing interests.

"It combines social justice with Republican interests," Peeples said, by improving bus service while at the same time reducing the cost of new mass transit construction subsidies that Republicans have sought to economize on.

"There's been (Bush) administration support for these things, and we managed to get into the latest authorization of the latest transportation bill," tapping a Department of Transportation program called New Starts, usually reserved for rail projects, for \$75 million.

The East Bay BRT Project, estimated to cost between

\$310 million and \$400 million (the cost of barely four miles of BART tracks), already has

\$175 million set aside from a combination of state and local dollars, bridge toll funds and local transportation sales taxes.

While budget-cutters have endorsed the idea, environmentalists have also warmed up to light rail lite without the rails.

"Rational decisions have to be based on costs, benefits and potential to reduce emissions," said Sergio Sanchez, executive director of the Washington-based Clean Air Institute. "BRTs are becoming very popular because they have demonstrated their effectiveness in different parts of the world."

In fact, bus rapid transit is the only type of public transportation that can earn global warming-fighting credits under Kyoto Protocols, which seek international cooperation to cut down on greenhouse gases.

The United States has yet to agree to abide by those rules, however.

While AC Transit seems to have this point in history on its side, it now has to get through an always-difficult environmental review process to keep to its plan to start construction by late 2008 or early 2009 and have the line running by 2011.

Homeowners in Berkeley fret that traffic diverted from bus-only lanes will sift through their neighborhoods. Other homeowners worry that if the streetscape-transforming concept is successful in their quiet neighborhoods, their character might become more dense, more urban.

Meanwhile, the city of San Leandro has thrown a wrench into the process in recent years by declaring its opposition to making lanes on East 14th Street car-free. The dedicated bus lanes would snarl traffic and cause problems for pedestrians, they concluded, so AC Transit is now planning a scaled-back version of BRT once it reaches San Leandro.

San Leandro Mayor Tony Santos is careful to note that he needs to convey the position taken by the City Council. On the other hand, he thinks the council ought to reopen that debate.

"We're on a threshold I believe on changing the mode of travel in the Bay Area," Santos said. "High gas prices are forcing some people to rethink their positions."