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Transportation planners cheer bus rapid transit Method is efficient, costs less than rail and is catching on

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Even among public transportation enthusiasts, the bus suffers a lowly reputation as a smoke-belching workhorse that creeps and lurches through traffic, stopping at every street corner.

"It's perceived as slow and inefficient," said Jayme Kunz, spokeswoman for the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, which runs buses and light rail cars in the South Bay.

But buses are getting a makeover in the Bay Area and nationally. Transit officials are not only buying sleek, low-floored buses, they're in some cases giving them dedicated lanes, priority at traffic signals and fewer stops.

Two speedy bus lines are already running in the Bay Area -- one in the East Bay, one in the South Bay -- and San Francisco is deep in the planning stages for fast-and-fancy Muni lines along Van Ness Avenue and Geary Boulevard. They're expected to be in service by 2010 and 2011, respectively.

Bus rapid transit, as it's known, is a hot trend in American public transportation. Perhaps a dozen cities are operating some form of bus rapid transit while dozens of others are planning, or at least discussing, systems.

"It isn't just fashion; ideas come and go," said Randy Rentschler, spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. "Having a light rail line in your city was the thing to do in the last 10 to 15 years. But it's expensive. With bus rapid transit, you can have most of the benefits of light rail -- dedicated lanes, limited stops, nice vehicles -- without the huge costs."

Two bus rapid transit systems are already rolling in the Bay Area -- AC Transit's 72-R rapid bus along San Pablo Avenue in the East Bay -- and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's 522- Rapid between East San Jose and Palo Alto in the South Bay. Before the end of the year, AC Transit plans to launch a second speedy bus line: the 1-R from San Leandro to the UC Berkeley campus along East 14th Street, International Boulevard and Telegraph Avenue.

All three of those lines are minimalist versions of true bus rapid transit, relying on fewer bus stops and special traffic signal devices that allow them to hold a traffic signal on green or cause it to change early to cut the bus travel times.

The most efficient bus rapid transit systems also have completely dedicated lanes and boarding platforms, for example.

Nevertheless, AC Transit spokesman Clarence Johnson said the 72- R service, which started in 2003, cut travel time from Contra Costa College in San Pablo to Jack London Square in Oakland by 20 percent compared to a regular bus line that followed the same route. A survey of riders found that more than half saved at least 10 minutes on the 72-R. Ridership, he said, more than doubled.

"It's a real glowing success," he said.

Both AC and VTA chose to start small, rolling out what they could afford, then eventually upgrading by adding dedicated lanes, miniature stations and ticket machines at bus stops, and other features.

San Francisco's Muni, which hauls about 600,000 passengers a day, is taking a different approach. Rather than starting with the bare- bones version of bus rapid transit and upgrading, Muni, working with the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, plans to start with a full-featured system, including dedicated lanes.

The Transportation Authority, which administers projects funded by transportation sales tax revenues, has held a series of public hearings on each project and developed general designs for each rapid bus route. The Van Ness line is expected to cost \$65 million, the Geary line about \$150 million.

Each will feature high-capacity low-floor buses, dedicated lanes -- either on the sides or in the center of the road -- and high- quality bus shelters much like the Third Street light rail stations. They'll have real-time bus information and ticket vending machines, and they'll be 11 inches above the ground "so that passengers can walk on from the platform" without having to climb stairs, said Julie Kirschbaum, senior planner for the authority.

"These are two bus rapid transit lines that are going to be connected to our light rail lines," she said.

Early discussions of the Geary line drew some opposition from merchants who feared they would lose parking spaces to the dedicated lanes, and from some bus riders who didn't want to lose their corner bus stops. Kirschbaum said studies found that the loss of parking spaces would be less than originally thought. And Muni will continue to run local buses that make regular stops -- but they won't be so speedy.

Across the bay on the 72-Rapid bus Monday, riders lauded the speedier service.

"It's way better," said Tito Pinto, 21, who rides the bus from his Richmond home to Ashby Avenue in Berkeley, where he sells hardware. "You don't stop at this block, then the next block, then the next block and the next block. Sometimes you're in a hurry."