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AC Transit's plan to run buses like trains

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AC Transit officials think they found a golden opportunity to use the golden anniversary of the end of the Key System trains to promote their plan for a rapid bus system.

"It really is looking back to the future," said Rebecca Kaplan, vice president of the AC Transit Board of Directors.

The Key System, a popular rail network that carried passengers around the East Bay and over the Bay Bridge until 1958, ended with the rise of the private automobile.

In the five decades since, traffic congestion on Bay Area roads has turned into a regional headache - and a challenge for transit planners looking for ways to lure people out of their cars and onto buses, trains and ferries.

One answer promoted by AC Transit's administrative staff is bus rapid transit (BRT), a program gaining ground in such places as Los Angeles and Bogota, Colombia, that essentially treats buses as trains with their own dedicated lanes. San Francisco also is studying the idea.

But the plan has not been universally embraced, with critics questioning its effects on traffic.

As envisioned, the buses would run along dedicated lanes free of trucks and cars. New boarding platforms or stations would be constructed every third of a mile or so. High-tech traffic signals would be installed to give the buses priority when moving through the intersections and real-time arrival information would be available at the stations. The buses and platforms would be designed to make it easier for people to get on and off the vehicles faster.

AC Transit's plan calls for running the service between Berkeley and San Leandro, with stops in Oakland. The buses would operate primarily on Telegraph Avenue, International Boulevard and East 14th Street.

While endorsed by transit advocates who believe such a system would shorten trips and draw more riders, critics have voiced concerns over the loss of traffic lanes for cars and trucks. Parking spaces also would be eliminated or moved.

The project would cost an estimated \$250 million, according to AC Transit spokesman Clarence Johnson, and be paid for with a combination of federal, state and regional funds. The goal is to start operations in 2011, but before that can happen, environmental reviews must be completed and the cities where the system would operate must sign off on the plan. The final route has not been determined.

Kaplan said that one benefit of BRT is that it can be developed in stages and tweaked from location to location. For example, she said, dedicated lanes could be used in some areas but not in others.