

# Will bus rapid transit get Montgomery commuters out of their cars?

*Quality, reliability key in successful bus rapid transit, experts say*

by Kate S. Alexander and Alex Ruoff, Staff Writers, The Gazette.

As Montgomery County considers a bus rapid transit system to ease traffic congestion and expand mass transit, those familiar with BRT say design and performance are crucial to a system's success.

Montgomery County's Transit Task Force has recommended a 160-mile network of 23 BRT corridors be built in the next nine to 20 years. The recommendation calls for building the system in three phases, starting in the highest economic development priority areas, and estimates the capital cost of the total system to be \$1.8 billion with an average annual operating cost of \$1.1 million per mile.

In its May report, the task force said 70 percent of commuters drive alone and estimated BRT would have a daily ridership of 165,000 to 207,000.

Washington, D.C.-area commuters lose 74 hours — or more than three days — each year in delayed traffic, according to the 2011 annual Urban Mobility Report by the Texas Transportation Institute. On a typical weekday, that translates to two hours spent commuting by each driver.

Whether riders will opt for BRT over their car or other transportation comes down to how a system is designed and built, said Dennis Hinebaugh, director of the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute of the University of South Florida in Tampa.

What one community might need to grow ridership could be quality stations and vehicles that run in mixed traffic, he said. Whereas in Montgomery County, it might need exclusive lanes.

'A bus is a bus is a bus'

In its recommendation, the task force abandoned the traditional moniker of BRT for RTV, or Rapid Transit Vehicle, to break away from the stigma of the bus and describe the "unique rapid transit vehicle system that it has proposed."

But those experienced with BRT say it's best to call the project what it is.

“A bus is a bus is a bus. You can put lipstick on a pig but it is still a pig,” said Doug Bowen of the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers. “If it is on rubber tires and it’s not a truck, van or automobile, it is a bus.”

While not opposed to bus transit, Bowen was critical of arguments for BRT as advocates try to sell it to their communities.

“Not calling BRT a bus is deceptive,” he said. “If this is the system you are selling to your community, be honest and factual.”

Hinebaugh said what you call the system does not change how riders or developers perceive it.

“You can call it whatever you want, people know what it is when they see it,” he said. “What people look at is performance, quality and reliability.”

Quality, reliability matter

Ridership numbers from across America indicate riders will and do use BRT, particularly those who did not previously use transit.

Report 118 of the Transit Cooperative Research Program, dated 2007, showed ridership increased between 20 percent and 100 percent in areas where BRT was built. Additionally, a large portion of the ridership comes from new trips, not other forms of transit, according to the report.

The 2009 “Characteristics of Bus Rapid Transit for Decision-Making” report funded by the Federal Transit Administration found in 2008 that the Los Angeles County, Calif., Orange Line corridor had an average weekday ridership of 41,580 before BRT was built. After it opened in 2005, ridership increased 51 percent, to 62,597, and BRT was found to be 25 percent faster than local bus routes, according to the report.

The 14-mile Orange Line carries more than 20,000 riders each weekday.

Starting in April 2012, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority is reporting average weekday ridership growth to about 25,000.

The Orange Line features signal priority to allow the line to move quickly through intersections, as well as off-board fare collection. All but one mile of the line is an at-grade transitway, which are roads for the exclusive use of the transit vehicles, according to the CBRT report.

Montgomery’s Transit Task Force recommended dedicated lanes for its BRT system to the extent possible.

Dedicated, exclusive or express bus lanes have proven successful, even for traditional buses.

In New Jersey, the XBL, the Lincoln Tunnel's Exclusive Bus Lane, which operated its first full year in 1971, runs as a 2.5-mile bus lane against the flow of traffic along N.J. 495 from the N.J. Turnpike to the Lincoln Tunnel. It operates during the weekday morning peak of 6 to 10 a.m.

"It is so successful it is a failure," Bowen said. "It has so much traffic on it, it is like watching elephants on parade."

In 2009, the XBL averaged 1,791 buses daily, which translated to almost 16.5 million passengers that year, carrying more commuters into midtown Manhattan than PATH, Penn Station commuter rail or ferries each day during the same period, according to the website of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the lane. Commuters who ride on the XBL save an average of 15 to 20 minutes compared to the normal N.J. 495 lanes.

After debating whether to continue its nearly 30-year history of using heavy rail service for public transportation, the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority in 2000 decided to build a 9.2-mile, \$200 million bus rapid transit system connecting the city's downtown Public Square to nearby East Cleveland along Euclid Avenue, said Mary McCahon, a spokeswoman for the authority.

Called the HealthLine, the system has 40 bus stops and buses run about five minutes apart, according to the authority. A trip along its entire length takes about 30 minutes and costs \$2.25. Like the D.C.-area Metrorail, fare is paid at stations to reduce lines getting onto the buses. Signal priority allows the line to move quickly through intersections.

Ridership on the HealthLine has grown 60 percent over the bus line it replaced. The original bus line took 2.6 million rides in its last year in operation, according to authority data. Last year the HealthLine saw 4.4 million rides, and the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute reports it has an average weekday ridership of 10,500.

Between November 2011 and April the HealthLine took 2.2 million passengers.

Ridership is about service, said Bill Vincent, director of the Breakthrough Technologies Institute, which operates the Bus Rapid Transit Policy Center program in Washington, D.C.

"If you provide a better service that gets someone from where they are to where they need to go safely, reliably and in a reasonable amount of time, people will use it," he said.

By its nature, BRT gives communities flexibility to develop a robust service plan, he said.

Using stations instead of bus stops, vehicles with alternative fuels, fare collection that is off-board, dedicated right-of-way, and allowing passengers to board at any door are all features borrowed from rail and can speed up service for BRT passengers, Hinebaugh said.

Features such as signal priority — where a signal will change as a rapid transit bus approaches to move it through the intersection — allow for higher speeds and less stops, he said.

“All those gain reliability, gain speed and that is what the public is looking for: to get to work or a shop on time at a speed that comes close to the automobile,” he said.