

# Fresno's transit future at key place

## Bus Rapid Transit part of Swearingin's vision.

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Something finally is accelerating for Fresno's proposed Bus Rapid Transit system — controversy.

The fight could decide the fate of Mayor Ashley Swearingin's vision for Fresno.

"Bus Rapid Transit isn't just a bus system," City Manager Bruce Rudd says. "This is the backbone of the general plan update. The infill developments, the retooling of vacant buildings, the creation of high-investment corridors — they all will pivot on this investment."

But two City Council members fear BRT, like so many other ballyhooed cures for Fresno's ills, could become an expensive blunder.

"Bus Rapid Transit is the worst thing to come along since I've been on the council," says Council Member Clint Olivier, who joined the council in January 2011. "Getting into a project of this magnitude, where we don't have the money to maintain it, is a disservice to the taxpayer."

Council Member Steve Brandau says Fresno Area Express, the well-known FAX bus system that serves the city's 112 square miles, is in a state of disrepair.

In fact, Brandau says, "our whole city is in disrepair. That's where our money should be spent."

The council has long viewed BRT with raised eyebrows. Some members, critical of what they say is Swearingin's obsession with downtown, see BRT as another misplaced priority. Others wonder if neighborhoods without BRT will suffer.

Rudd and the mayor have parried the criticisms. BRT plans periodically come before the council and always find at least four votes.

But BRT, still some two years away from birth, appears to have hit a turning point. The council on Sept. 26 refused to adopt a seemingly routine report needed to keep the project going.

With Olivier leading the charge, the council told Rudd to spend the next six weeks doing a better job of educating the public about BRT.

The report, a declaration that BRT won't harm the environment, is expected to return to the council on Nov. 7. Olivier and Brandau aren't guaranteeing no votes, but say they aren't alone with their reservations.

If the council votes no, BRT grinds to a halt.

The BRT way

Bus Rapid Transit is City Hall's dream of a bus network so speedy, efficient and pleasant that Fresnoans happily give up their cars for mass transit.

OK, not all Fresnoans. But big bunches of them.

The project construction cost is nearly \$50 million, about \$40 million coming from the feds, the rest from the state. The grants are approved, but not all money is in hand.

BRT routes will unfold in phases. City officials expect them to someday crisscross the metropolitan area.

The first phase will serve two of Fresno's busiest corridors that lead to downtown — Blackstone Avenue from River Park in the north and Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road from Clovis Avenue in the east.

City officials say BRT has two big advantages over regular FAX service.

The first is saved time.

Customer stops generally are spaced every quarter-mile on FAX. Riders decide where the bus pulls over. A bus on a busy route stops every quarter-mile.

BRT bus stops will be spaced every half-mile.

Then there's boarding the bus.

FAX customers in single file climb a few steps onto the bus and drop the fare into a box. Bicyclists secure their bikes on racks in front of the bus, then board. Customers in wheelchairs board with the aid of a lift. Wheelchairs are secured before the bus moves on.

This tedious process is pruned with BRT.

BRT stations will feature ticket-vending machines. Customers pay before they board.

BRT stations will have platforms permitting level boarding. Three sets of doors open on a BRT bus (which is longer than a standard bus). Everyone, including bicyclists and the disabled, board at once. Wheelchairs, for reasons tied to BRT's method of operation, don't need FAX-style securing.

Station platforms will jut a little into the street. The BRT bus will stop in the middle of a traffic lane rather than pull to the curb. When boarding is done, the driver doesn't have to wait for passing traffic.

All of this is designed to reduce "dwell time."

Unlike FAX buses, BRT buses will have a "traffic signal priority" system. In essence, onboard computers will talk to traffic lights. The BRT bus approaching a red light might be able to hurry a green light. If the light is green, the BRT bus might keep it that way until clear of the intersection.

BRT is expected to reduce average trip time by as much as 25%.

The new system's reliability is as important as its time-saving qualities, city officials say.

BRT buses at hours of peak ridership would arrive at stations every 10 minutes. FAX buses on the busiest routes come every 20 minutes.

If no one wants on or off at a FAX stop, the bus moves on. BRT buses stop at each station.

BRT stations will provide real-time information on when the next bus is due.

Fares always are subject to change. For now, BRT's standard fare would be the same \$1.25 charged for a FAX bus ride.

Fresno's Bus Rapid Transit system even has a brand name — the "Q," as in quick, quality and "q-ool."

City officials desperately hope the day soon comes when young and old, rich and poor, hip and stodgy all find it common sense to say of a cross-town trip: "Let's take the Q!"

Storm clouds gather

A swift, affordable public-transit system has been Fresno's crusade almost since the start of the post-World War II housing boom.

Light rail always was the No. 1 option. Ideas abounded. Two local businessmen once pitched an elevated rail system running the length of Blackstone and Shaw avenues.

Money, of course, was the hang-up. Even 30 years ago, light-rail costs were pegged in the billions.

Bus Rapid Transit, hardly a new idea, gathered momentum at City Hall when Alan Autry took office as mayor in 2001. Autry saw BRT as another way to heal his "tale of two cities." Local planning officials by 2006 were touting a thick BRT master plan. Yet, the idea remained only a series of drawings.

A new mayor, the Great Recession and a different attitude in Washington changed things.

Swearengin took office in 2009 vowing to revitalize not just downtown but 15 or so square miles of the historic urban core.

The financial meltdown nearly bankrupted Fresno, causing city leaders to seriously question the cost of fringe growth.

And the federal government, in the form of President Barack Obama's Strong Cities Strong Communities initiative, came to town with promises of cash and political muscle.

The result is Swearengin's plan to dramatically transform how Fresnoans live, work and play. It's complex.

There is a 2035 general plan update that mandates 45% of future growth to be infill. Definitions of "infill" are far from clear. Council Member Lee Brand (who says he's on the fence with BRT) estimates only about 2% of development occurs in older neighborhoods.

There's a reformed development code, an overhauled permitting process and an enhanced financing plan that is supposed to make infill investment irresistible.

High-speed rail, with its majestic downtown station, allegedly is just around the corner. The feds have written a check for nearly \$16 million to turn Fulton Mall into Fulton Street. Downtown's Cultural Arts District is filling with chic (and leased) loft apartments while Millennials are said to be clamoring to want more.

At the same time, much of Fresno's inner core is reviled nationwide for its stunning concentrations of poverty.

Swearengin is convinced her plans, most still in the "we're close" stage of drafting, will fix the poverty while turning central Fresno into the regional hub.

To make it all happen, the mayor must find a workable substitute for Fresno's mania — personal transportation.

BRT, says City Manager Rudd, "is the foundation."

Still lots of questions

City officials at one time thought BRT would open for business in 2014. Now they're looking at early 2016.

They say they've been busy keeping Fresno solvent.

The system's designs are about 60% done. They should be finished by next spring.

Much remains subject to politics. For example, much of the Ventura/Kings Canyon corridor was supposed to have one lane in each direction reserved largely for BRT buses. This idea was squashed after Council Member Sal Quintero, who represents southeast Fresno, said store-owners saw the special lane as a business-killer because it would curtail on-street parking.

With so much still in the air, the concerns of Council Members Olivier and Brandau are inevitably vague as well.

They ask: What about operational funds once BRT is built? What about a BRT reserve? What about the bleak stops on many FAX routes? What about riders along the two BRT corridors who like the current quarter-mile FAX stops?

Rudd responds: There is money to keep BRT going for three years. A reserve already is growing. Work is under way to upgrade 85 FAX stops. The city might run both BRT and FAX along Blackstone and Ventura/Kings Canyon if there is enough demand.

Rudd, who also is the city's transportation director, says he needs to put on his salesman's hat.

"I don't think we've done a very good job of conveying how BRT fits into the overall scheme of things."

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Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2013/10/12/3550716/fresnos-transit-future-at-key.html#storylink=cpy>