

EDITORIAL: Bus Rapid Transit will benefit Fresno residents

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A metropolitan city — especially one as sprawling as Fresno — needs mass transit that will cheaply and quickly move people to work, school, medical care, entertainment and shopping.

Lacking such a system, the barriers to education and employment are more formidable for residents without access to personal transportation.

Recognizing the need to enhance Fresno's public bus service, then-Mayor Alan Autry put the city on a course to develop Bus Rapid Transit routes on the Blackstone Avenue and the Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road corridors in 2001.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin has continued the push for BRT and, indeed, a City Council supermajority approved a 2035 general plan update that seeks to revitalize Fresno's urban core. That plan and the noble aspirations behind it have little chance of succeeding without improved mass transit.

Now, after 12 years of cooperation between City Hall and federal, state and regional transportation officials working to make BRT a reality, there are some on the City Council who want to stop the upgrade.

They fear that BRT will be a boondoggle and point to past City Hall decisions that turned into expensive blunders. It's important that our elected leaders take their oversight responsibilities seriously. It's equally important that they aren't timid and slaves to the status quo.

The fact is that BRT (often thought of as light rail with rubber wheels) is less expensive to build than light rail. It's also a fact that the \$50 million construction cost for the Fresno project is being underwritten by federal and state grants. Finally, Fresno's BRT plan has always been pitched as a demonstration: If it successful, other routes will be added; if it flops, the operational losses will be much less than if Fresno had tried light rail.

Fresno's biggest urban myth perhaps is that no one rides the bus. True, some buses on some routes during particular parts of the day are nearly empty. But there are also routes jammed with riders, particularly those taking students to school and those running along Blackstone Avenue between downtown and the north end. According to the American Public Transportation Association's latest ridership report, Fresno Area Express carried 5.4 million passengers during the first half of this year.

With BRT's quicker and more frequent service, ridership is likely to rise — helping residents, helping our economy and reducing air pollution.

As City Hall nears the completion of plans and start of BRT construction, it is reassuring to know that City Manager Bruce Rudd has extensive knowledge of bus operations. We are confident that Rudd will be a tough and thorough taskmaster on this project.

More than 30 U.S. cities have BRT and a dozen more cities are planning systems. Fresno should join the list. BRT must not be brought to a halt by the Fresno City Council.

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