

Opinion by Steve Brandau: Fresno doesn't need BRT

By Steve Brandau

January 27, 2014

Can the city of Fresno entice people to move into condos on Blackstone Avenue by installing a new bus system on that street? Will more people use a bus if it is bigger and faster? Will you start riding this bus? Will you be making that move?

The feds and the state will pay for this bus with your tax dollars, but is that a good use of your money if we don't need the bus? In addition, the city will assume the annual maintenance of \$2.3 million starting after year three. Wouldn't you prefer spending that money on making all of our neighborhoods safer and doing everyday maintenance like fixing potholes, streetlights and sidewalks?

Welcome to the world of a Fresno City Council member. Lots of tough questions and difficult decisions.

Some background, and then on to the bus ... California has single-handedly decided to purge greenhouse gases from the planet. Gases like carbon dioxide, which we exhale with every breath. Our Legislature has passed laws that force cities like Fresno to entertain highly unrealistic and potentially damaging policies. Often cloaked in the language of "sustainability" and "smart growth," these policies are mostly about reducing reliance on cars. Essentially, government should reduce Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) by forcing people to live closer to where they work.

In our city that means downtown, Blackstone and Kings Canyon Boulevard have been chosen to be high-density corridors. To service the remote possibility of thousands of people moving into future dwellings on Blackstone and Kings Canyon, we must have a new public transportation system: Bus Rapid Transit. BRT is a shiny new state-of-the art, energy-efficient bus that needs its own lane. If I were a Los Angeles City Council member, I might support BRT. The fact is, in Fresno, there is no demand for it.

Policies forcing Fresno to build high-density residential while all our neighbors build homes with front and backyards, swimming pools and garages, puts us on a collision course with the market. We will be left with our high-density housing and a shiny new bus that nobody will need or ride.

In a heinous twist of fate, when people reject Fresno's high-density plan and move to neighboring cities, we will create more vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions will increase as people drive from where they live back into Fresno for work.

The only way around this outcome is to force all of the cities and towns around us to stop their growth. That usually means more lawsuits against our neighbors, which hasn't worked out so well for Fresno.

The truth hurts. In years past, Fresno was allowed to grow far and wide. Better decisions could have been made, but were not. Reversing this course with high-density projects and BRT will only come at the detriment of Fresno and to the benefit of neighboring cities.

I support some revitalization efforts in downtown Fresno as well as common-sense planning and growth that encourages better air quality.

However, most of the people I talk to are not planning to leave their beloved neighborhoods for residences on Blackstone.

If people in Fresno demanded high density, developers already would be building high density. Without a demand, we are implementing the ultimate "build it and they will come" project.

I would rather our city find alternatives like seeking federal dollars to expand and modernize our current bus fleet. This includes adding new lines throughout our city and expanding operating hours so employees and students who need bus service at night have that option.

Synchronizing traffic lights is another alternative to reduce greenhouse gases that the whole city could benefit by.

The bottom line: We need to step back and look for alternatives before we pull the trigger on another ill-fated dream.

There are great people on both sides of this debate. The City Council will address this issue at 5 p.m. Thursday. I hope that you come and let your voice be heard.

Steve Brandau represents District 2 and is president of the Fresno City Council.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/01/27/3735920/steve-brandau-fresno-doesnt-need.html#storylink=cpy>