

# **EDITORIAL: Rejecting \$50 million for Bus Rapid Transit would tarnish Fresno**

By The Bee Editorial Board

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Faced with myriad challenges — air pollution, slow bus service and a deteriorating urban core, to name a few — Fresno leaders decided in 2006 to embark on attracting state and federal funds to build a Bus Rapid Transit system.

If you'll remember, there had been much discussion throughout the 1990s about building a light-rail system to link the "new downtown" at Woodward Park and River Park to downtown Fresno.

Given light rail's high cost, other options were explored. Bus Rapid Transit was seen as the right fit for Fresno, and City Hall decided that the system should start with two lines: Blackstone Avenue and Kings Canyon Boulevard.

Since that time, the BRT plan has met every benchmark with strong Fresno City Council support. In fact, the plan is so well thought of in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., that it won \$50 million in funding against stiff competition.

But, after these victories, there's a real possibility that a majority of City Council members are prepared to end the BRT quest and reject the \$50 million with their votes Thursday evening.

If this happens, it will send a message across the state and the nation — to government officials and private investors — that Fresno's political leadership can't be trusted.

Opponents of BRT say that they would prefer to see federal and state dollars go to beef up Fresno Area Express bus routes. That's fine, but what do you think the odds are of winning more grants after Fresno has stamped "return to sender" on \$50 million?

The motivations of BRT opponents involve planning and politics. As the system is essential to infill development and the success of the city's 2035 General Plan Update, developers see BRT's demise as their chance to heavily influence the rewriting of the plan. Developers, along with public employee unions, are the biggest contributors to campaign races. Not only are four council seats up for election this year, but Mayor Ashley Swearingin terms out in 2016.

As the BRT debate has heated up, things have turned ugly. Political consultant Tal Cloud is airing radio commercials intended to stoke irrational concerns about public safety. In addition, the Central Valley Tea Party has circulated an email predicting a crime spike at River Park if BRT is approved.

Shame on them both.

Fresno should be better than this. And Fresno must be better than this if it is to become a great city.

If BRT is defeated Thursday evening, it will be an acknowledgment that our city has lost confidence in itself and that it is content to repeat the mistakes of the past.

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