

Fresno City Council to take key votes on new bus system

By George Hostetter

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The Fresno City Council will again debate the wisdom of building a speedier bus system stuck for years on the drawing board.

The council Thursday is slated to vote on three items connected to the proposed \$50 million Bus Rapid Transit system. An environmental report and two administrative contracts totaling \$1.7 million are on tap.

The council is divided on BRT, as it's called. Some say it's too risky for Fresno's empty coffers and dirty air. Others say it's the key to improving Fresno's bottom line and air.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin is gung-ho for BRT, saying it's vital to her efforts to revive Fresno's quality of life.

The basics of BRT are simple. The first phase is an L-shaped route. It would go from Blackstone Avenue near the River Park shopping centers, head south to downtown's Courthouse Park, then go into southeast Fresno via Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road.

Fares would be the same as on regular Fresno Area Express routes. Riders, including those in wheelchairs and with bicycles, would pre-pay and board bigger buses from a raised platform.

Bus stations would be a half-mile apart, compared to a quarter-mile on most regular routes. Stations would give customers real-time news on their bus's location. BRT buses at some intersections would get a brief headstart on the rest of traffic.

These and other features would lead to speedier rides and more reliable service, BRT supporters say.

BRT's effects would cascade, they add. Long-time FAX customers, many facing financial challenges, would enjoy better low-cost transportation. Occasional riders might choose bus over car more often. An expanded BRT network (Shaw Avenue is a likely phase-two target) would spur this momentum.

Council Member Oliver Baines recently explained from the dais his conversion from BRT fence-sitter to advocate. Fresno doesn't have a track record with anything like BRT, Baines said. The feds and the state have committed money to build the system, he said. Grants are in place to fund

operations for several years, he said. BRT has worked elsewhere, he said. Life isn't for the timid, he said.

Let's give BRT a shot, Baines said.

Council President Steve Brandau and Council Member Clint Olivier are vocal critics. They say its upside is oversold. They say taxpayer money, regardless of its source, should be spent with caution. They say the federal money spigot will someday be turned off, leaving no palatable option for the city with a perpetually tight budget. They say the regular FAX system desperately needs attention.

All of this is old news to loyal City Council audiences.

But BRT in the last six months has become a proxy in a fight with higher stakes.

Who's top dog at City Hall, the mayor or the council? Will Fresno become the bastion of egalitarianism envisioned by the 2035 general plan's infill theme? Will City Hall use its unrivaled land-use power to force people to live where they don't want to?

Fresno has fought this "tale of two cities" battle many times -- police auditor, trash privatization, parks construction, urban farming, among others. Fulton Mall is just around the corner.

But today, BRT is alone in the ring.

If you go:

What: Fresno City Council hearing on Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT

Where: Fresno City Council chamber, 2600 Fresno St.

When: 5 p.m. Thursday

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Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/01/29/3739812/fresno-city-council-to-take-key.html#storylink=cpy>