

Fresno council says no to Bus Rapid Transit, but it's not over

By George Hostetter

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During their tenures as Fresno County supervisors, both Phil Larson and Judy Case

A divided Fresno City Council decided it's time to take a step back from the proposed Bus Rapid Transit system.

But just about everyone on the dais agreed the \$50 million project is far from dead.

The council on a 4-3 vote early Friday morning rejected a request to spend about \$1.7 million on two contracts that would have helped get the project shovel-ready.

The decision ended a seven-hour hearing that included nearly 100 speakers from the audience and several speeches from the dais that went for nearly 30 minutes each.

Council members Blong Xiong, Oliver Baines and Sal Quintero were on the losing side.

Dozens of BRT supporters stuck it out to the bitter end.

"You'll probably see Bus Rapid Transit come back to this body," Council President Steve Brandau told them.

Council Member Paul Caprioglio echoed a similar theme: "I think we should go back to the drawing board."

In a statement early Friday, Mayor Ashley Swearengin said: "While I am disappointed in tonight's vote, I am committed to working with my colleagues on the City Council to address concerns they have and bring this item back for reconsideration."

Passion, cheers, ridicule, admonishment and number-crunching were the night's standard fare -- and that was just from the council members.

The issue seemed simple. Swearengin wants to use federal and state grants to build a speedy, more reliable bus system along two major corridors. There's Blackstone Avenue from the River

Park shopping centers in the north to downtown's Courthouse Park. There's Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road from downtown into the far reaches of southeast Fresno.

The BRT buses would be 60 feet long, compared to 40 feet for a regular Fresno Area Express bus. Platforms and prepayment of fares would make for easier boarding, especially for those with bicycles or in wheelchairs. Small changes to road design would lead to quicker trips. BRT stations with real-time news on bus location would add to customer convenience.

Government grants would fund construction. Other grants would pay for the first three years of operation.

City Hall tackles transportation ideas every week. But BRT is a piece of a bigger public-policy puzzle, and that's what got both sides riled up.

The council with Swearingin's strong support adopted in early 2012 a 2035 general plan update theme that promised to change how Fresno grows. Edge development would be curtailed. Infill development would be spurred.

The update, which should come to the council this year, has many parts. High-density living is one. Another is economic development in long-neglected neighborhoods. A third is improving air quality by nudging people out of their cars more often.

BRT, with its promise of a public-transportation system that guarantees quality mobility for rich and poor alike, is viewed by Swearingin as the update's spine. Sever it and City Hall must start anew on a general plan revision, she says.

Critics for months have said BRT is too much, too soon. They worry about operational costs when grants expire. They fear BRT ridership estimates are too optimistic. They say fixing the struggling FAX system, which covers most of the city, should be the first priority.

The 93 public speakers repeatedly covered these pros and cons.

Business owners worried that on-street parking would be lost. Not true, said City Manager Bruce Rudd.

BRT opponents worried about the hooks that come with federal money. Federal bucks flow into City Hall all the time, yet Fresno remains the land of the free, Rudd said.

BRT supporters worried that council members skeptical of the system don't care about the disadvantaged. These council members said they wouldn't want to fix FAX if that were true.

Quintero, who represents southeast Fresno, said his district is a beehive of activity.

"There's ridership there," Quintero said. "I think (BRT) is going to be a tremendous asset for District 5."

Council Member Lee Brand was full of facts and figures to buttress his view that BRT at this point doesn't pencil out.

"It's good to have dreams," Brand said. "But you have to have a practical way to get there."

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