

Fresno bus rapid transit in cross hairs of funding battle

By George
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A fight in Congress over transportation funding isn't dampening City Hall's enthusiasm for Fresno's new bus system.

City Manager Bruce Rudd said he knows some representatives are vowing to end federal funding for selected rail and bus systems across the country, including Fresno's Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project.

"This isn't unusual in Washington," Rudd said Friday.

Rudd said he expects Congress to thunder and roar a bit, then decide to fulfill the feds' promises.

"I'm not worried about it right now," Rudd said.

There are two proposals in Congress to end federal grants for dozens of transit projects.

The legislation, sponsored by Republican Reps. Thomas Massie of Kentucky and Mark Sanford of South Carolina, also could affect more than 750 companies in 39 states that produce rail and bus transit components, including manufacturers in those two states.

According to the American Public Transportation Association, eliminating federal transit funding would put 66 projects at risk. Fresno's BRT is among them.

Transit advocates are pushing lawmakers to continue federal funding for these projects as part of a long-term transportation bill Congress needs to pass this year.

The American Public Transportation Association reported that public transit ridership hit 10.8 billion trips last year, the largest in nearly six decades. The group projects that the Sanford and Massie bills would result in a 43% reduction in transit systems' capital funds.

Governmental turmoil is nothing new to Fresno's BRT dreams.

Fresno officials for at least 15 years have sought a bus system that avoids many of the inconveniences of traditional public bus service. The big hurdle was always money.

City officials several years ago seemed ready to settle on a plan with a price of about \$50 million, most coming from the federal government.

New buses, technology and shrewd positioning of improved bus stops would better serve public transportation's traditional customers, city officials said. Some of Fresno's many car-lovers might even leave the gas-guzzler in the garage on occasion and take the bus.

BRT over the years would expand in phases. The first route would be L-shaped. The hub would be downtown's Courthouse Park. BRT buses would go north on Blackstone Avenue to the River Park shopping centers. BRT buses also would head into southeast Fresno along the Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road corridor.

The 2035 general plan and Mayor Ashley Swearingin's vision of revitalized older neighborhoods count on a thriving BRT system.

But some on the City Council came to believe BRT was promising more than it could deliver. A divided council in

early 2014 voted to kill the plan. Council members returned seven weeks later to approve a trimmed version of BRT.

It's unclear what the reformed system will cost.

Rudd on Friday described his preferred scenario: Congress authorizes full BRT funding, City Hall and federal transportation officials confirm their partnership, the City Council approves a construction contract this summer, work begins in late summer/early fall, BRT makes its Fresno debut in 2016.

"People are beginning to pay attention to Fresno as far as future investments are concerned," Rudd said. "BRT is a part of that."

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