

Priority Bus Conference Notes

By Noah Kazis

<http://dc.thecityfix.com/priority-bus-conference-notes/>

I spent yesterday at a fantastic conference on priority buses in the Washington area. Organized by the TPB and the Federal Transit Administration, we got to hear from transit officials from across the country about what innovations their areas have made with regards to buses and then from an incredibly wide assortment of DC area officials and activists about what the future holds for the regional bus system. Since you probably have jobs and other inconveniences preventing you from spending all day learning about “Providing New Transportation choices through Transit Prioritization Strategies,” I figured I would type up my notes so that anyone who likes can learn, comment and respond.

I’ll certainly be commenting on them over the next couple of days, but these are exactly as I wrote them down. That means that they are in no way comprehensive; rather, they are a combination of things I found particularly interesting, maddening and surprising with large gaps where I already knew something or didn’t know enough to even understand. Use them as you like, and let me know if there’s anything you don’t understand or think that I wrote down incorrectly. Also, they should be posting powerpoints from the conference here some time very soon.

Panel 1 – Introduction

Charles Jenkins, Frederick County Commissioner and Chair, Transportation Planning Board (TPB)

Harriet Tregoning, Director, DC Office of Planning and Chair, TPB Scenario Study Task Force

- Jenkins: “moving forward with Purple Line light rail between Bethesda and New Carrollton.”
- Jenkins: bus ridership in region up over 3% a year over the last decade
- Tregoning: priority buses must be “pampering” if will be a “realistic choice for people who would otherwise drive”
- An exercise in what a priority bus network would look like very quickly became reality after stimulus bill passed.
- Every jurisdiction in MWCOG wants to be part of the program

Panel 2 – The role of Bus Transit in the Regional Transportation System

Howard Benn, Montgomery County RideOn and Chair, TPB Regional Bus Subcommittee

- 13 different public bus systems in the region – 700 non-Metro buses
- Buses are 45% of both transit boardings and costs
- Need to distinguish between BRT that has local routes on the end and those on completely separate paths
- On regional cooperation: “This is not Los Angeles. We get along here.”
- In suburbs there is a need to make the bus stops ADA compliant and pedestrian friendly – eg sidewalks to the stop.
- There are many ways to quickly improve existing bus service: lanes, queue jumps, transit signal priority, skip-stop operations, far-side stops
- He personally thinks buses are the “primary foundation solution”

Panel 3 – Examples of Priority Bus Transit in the United States

William Vincent, Breakthrough Technologies Institute, Moderator

Chun Wong, PE, Transportation Engineer, Metro Rapid, Los Angeles CA

David E. Wohlwill, AICP, Manager of Extended Range Planning, Port Authority, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Mike Schipper, Deputy General Manager for Engineering/Planning and Project Management, Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority

Craig A. Lamothe, AICP Senior Project Manager, Urban Partnership Agreement, Manager, Facilities Planning, Metro Transit, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Richard J. Lobron, Consultant, Director for Strategic Technologies – METRO, Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Houston, Texas

Los Angeles

- Metro Rapid Bus Project
- LADOT’s goal was to move traffic faster
- 50% of time bus was in service, was stopped
- 26 Metro Rapid lanes, 400 mi. of service, same ridership as Metrorail
- Attributes popularity to good branding
- “Stations” just a canopy and a lean bar
- Transponders in road allow transit signal priority
- Spacing between stops: local bus 0.2 mi, limited stop bus 0.3 mi, Rapid 0.7mi, Orange Line 1.0 mi
- Times down 25-40%, ridership up 4-49%, depending on route
- 1/3 of Orange line’s ridership new to transit

Pittsburgh

- MLK East Busway
- 9.1 mi w/ 9 stations and 1 stop. Opened 1983, with 2003 extension
- 25-28,000 weekday riders
- 3 routes are busway-only (make up 50% of busway’s riders). 29 routes are local with time on busway
- Cheaper per rider than local buses – \$1.78 vs. \$2.81

- Spurred \$740m of development over 20 years
 - Wohlwill feels comparable to what rail would have sparked
 - More impressive considering that the corridor has lost population, is along a freight railroad, and lacks any local/regional TOD policy
 - Convincing aerial photos of development near busway stations, including first Whole Foods in Pittsburgh

Cleveland

- Healthline – Euclid Corridor BRT
- Near-level boarding, off-board fare payment, unique vehicles, real-time passenger information, more frequent service, nicer waiting areas
- Happened b/c were looking at heaviest-use bus route and asked how to improve
- Framing: there are three corridors between our two major job centers. Two will remain auto-focused, but one will be transit-focused
- Didn't do LRT b/c couldn't get it funded (total cost of \$1b vs. \$200m)
- While installing BRT, redid curbs, sidewalks, utilities, lights, landscaping
- Near downtown, dedicated lanes in the middle with boarding on left. Switches to boarding on right and then lane on the right as moves away from town
- “success of the program will be what happens in the middle” – will it help Midtown neighborhood redevelop?
- Midtown rezoned to require less parking where Healthline goes through
- \$3b in new development already built, \$1.3b more in pipeline
- Cleveland State Uni. Redid master plan as a result of Healthline.

Twin Cities

- Buses allowed to run in highway shoulder
- Instituted in 1993 when flooding closed all but one bridge across river – four days between idea being floated and implementation
- Removes 1-1.5 lanes worth of cars at peak hours
- Perception of time-saving among bus riders 2x greater than actual time savings
- Safe b/c of training and slow speeds
- Have problem with jealous car drivers intentionally blocking shoulder while sitting in traffic
- Promotion – had celebrity drive Batmobile down highway and race a bus in the shoulder. The bus wins at rush hour.

Houston

- Lobron came from NY and Philly: “Houston is much, much different in terms of transit.”
- Houston expected to grow from 2m residents today to 4m residents in 2020!!
- Transit agency runs the highway HOV lanes
- Park-and-ride – 31 routes from parking lots (1,000-4,000 spaces each) to downtown, using HOV lanes. Uses normal buses, and only during peak hours

- HOV lanes were bus-only from 1979-1985, until state took them away
- I-10 is 22 lanes wide!
- HOV lanes carry 7-8% of traffic on highways, which is more than average
- Switching to HOT with dynamic pricing

Panel 4 – Perspectives from Stakeholder Groups

Ronald F. Kirby, Transportation Planning Board, Moderator

Robert Grow, Greater Washington Board of Trade

Stuart Schwartz, Coalition for Smarter Growth

Robert Dunphy, Urban Land Institute

David Alpert, WMATA Riders' Advisory Council, GreaterGreaterWashington.org

Larry Martin, TPB Citizens Advisory Committee, Sierra Club

Rod Lawrence, Managing Director, The JBG Companies

Kirby – in DC area “we’re a little too focused on our rail system”

Grow

- Reducing congestion is his goal
- Costs Safeway \$50-80 every hour their truck is stuck in traffic
- Better transit makes housing more affordable
- Young workers not only want to be able to easily get to work, want it to be green
- Need to sell business on that bus lines can be permanent
- “Metro has romance. It’s urbane. Buses have no romance. They’re urban.”

Schwartz

- Should distinguish Cleveland from Houston – priority buses are not all the same
- Goal is to have system like Curitiba
- Inner-ring suburbs most promising site
- Doesn’t want express routes that just fuel outward expansion and sprawl – infill of transit network a better goal

Dunphy

- “To developers, thinking about transit is like priests thinking about sex” – they know it’s important to their clients, but don’t have any experience
- If you pick a cheap route, you’re going to get cheap development
- Has been TOD around bus routes – points out East Seattle

Alpert

- The S9 express bus from Silver Spring has not been an adequate replacement for Red Line

- Metrorail is predictable, comfortable, speedy, and easy to navigate – you need all of these qualities
- Do a few routes very well rather than making minor improvements everywhere; help shift perception of bus
- Pick corridors that already have some business as core around which TOD can happen.

Martin

- “BRT has proven itself”
- HOT lanes good complement to transit
- “BRT is used as a Trojan horse to build more roads” – example of Miami-Dade. Therefore, only do BRT on existing roads to take space away from cars
- LRT in Portland, Salt Lake City and Denver has cost less per mile than BRT in Boston, LA and Ottawa. LRT also has lower operating costs.
- “People will always prefer rail over bus”

Lawrence

- Why do we say “road funding” as opposed to “transit subsidies”
- His firm not agnostic about transit – thinks important
- TOD is harder for developers – more uses, more height, means that there is a lot more complexity. Difficulty is different from profitability, though. Help developers learn how better

From questions: if you don't invest in reducing congestion, you have to pay a lot more to just maintain existing bus service.

Keynote - Roy Kienitz, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, US Department of Transportation

- After long time working in transp. policy, was completely amazed to see how easy it was to increase CAFÉ standards this year, when previously it was often almost impossible. Let's think big and not limit ourselves to what we consider possible.
- Amazed by London
- In setting up grant process for stimulus spending, he pushed back hard against those who wanted strict ranking criteria. Let's not stifle creativity.
- “The state of the art is poor.”
- Big problem that as a field we don't really know how to measure economic impact
- Very pro-politics. “It's not a bad thing that people care deeply about this.” We need to move away from the old engineering mindset of “I'm just a spokesman on behalf of the numbers”
- Most important thing is if your project is done in concert with other actors

Panel 5 – Prioritizing Bus Transit in the Washington Region

*Nat Bottigheimer, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA),
Moderator*

John Catoe, General Manager, WMATA

Gabe Klein, Director, District Department of Transportation

Neil Pedersen, Administrator, Maryland State Highway Administration

*Michael Harris, Transit Project Coordinator, Virginia Department of Rail and Public
Transportation*

WMATA Rep. (standing in for Catoe)

- Around 2025, the rail system will be at capacity
- Priority Corridor network all in places currently served by transit – current routes already carry half bus ridership
- Goal is bus service equal to rail
- On 16th street, 1% of vehicles are buses, but they carry 35% of people
- An increase of 3mph average bus speed increases fleet capacity by 30%

Harris

- Plans for BRT on I-66 and I-95/I-395 corridors
- Park+ride with stations
- Integration with HOT plans
- Again, goal is frequency, speed and reliability equal to rail
- In short term, looking at more employer car/vanpooling programs, more local feeder buses, bike/ped access and buses in shoulders

Pedersen

- Was talking about priority buses in 1989 – the idea isn't new, but it's back b/c it's improved
- DOTs need to move from thinking about vehicle throughput to people throughput
- Thinks that people get more multitasking done in the car than on transit
- BRT can be most cost-effective mode of transit there is, but isn't always
- Things that make it hard to implement – you're competing against a 20-year project wish list with constituencies who have been waiting.
- Re: shoulders – “the buses will only use it when traffic is backed up”

Klein

- Goal: “A transportation network that advances other city goals, especially those related to economic development, social equity, urban form and environmental quality”
- Probably we should raise the gas tax

- Implementing priority buses is cheap enough that the question is just if we want to do it
- Gave a shout-out to the Arlington rap
- Likes “small-fast plans”
- Learned on Georgia Ave. that transit signal priority doesn’t work on its own
- Reason for busway in ballpark district – can take the ROW before people feel like it’s their street
- On 9th street learned that bus priority lane won’t work without clear signs and enforcement
- Branding – “circulator is the fun alternative”

In all communities, LRT has a lot more appeal than BRT. But in VA only 10% of surveyed knew what BRT was. In MD, people were pushing for LRT where it was logistically impossible.

Panel 6 – Achieving Regional Consensus

Chris Zimmerman, Arlington County Board, Moderator

Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Council

Phil Mendelson, DC City Council

Catherine M. Hudgins, Fairfax County Board

Vic Weissberg, Prince George’s County Department of Public Works and Transportation

Hudgins

- Dulles corridor wasn’t always a major corridor, but we keep expanding transit as it grows
- What do you do with places where bus headway is 60 minutes and there is no service on Sundays? Can’t go from there to BRT. Need to do both.

Mendelson

- \$13.2b over 6 years of total transportation underfunding
- Funding is the problem. Period.

Elrich

- Slow growth – can’t build until the infrastructure is in place.
- Started as pro-LRT in general. Then Gov. Ehrlich’s DOT head convinced him that BRT awful by putting forward a not very good BRT plan. But has changed his opinion
- Wants grade separation and special, permanent stations for BRT
- Interested in creating a tax district around new stations to capture some of the huge increase in value.

Weissberg

- Doesn't want priority bus projects to take away from current bus services.
- Interested in incremental improvements to existing service, though there are lots of corridors in PGCounty where either priority buses or BRT would be great.

Zimmerman

- Stop arguing buses v. rail. Rail is just plain better, but most places where we look at bus, rail isn't even remotely possible.
- Question is how we improve bus and rail vs. car
- Worried about mechanisms to keep busways permanently for buses, not HOV