

Bus rapid transit, by any other name

Is BRT a better mouse trap? Or, more acronymically accurate, a better rat trap? Or is it simply better rapid transit, as Joe Calabrese in Cleveland aptly puts it?

Like a rose, BRT would still smell as sweet by any other name — as long as it delivers what a community needs with respect to cost-efficient transportation that moves rapidly with low impact on the environment and consequent reduction in traffic congestion.

But, also like a rose, BRT comes in many varieties. As pointed out in the article that begins on pg. 30, transit agencies often are not quite certain what type of vehicle will fit their BRT strategies. And manufacturers are reluctant to invest millions of dollars in trying to hit several moving targets simultaneously.

So, how can North American transit agencies move forward with BRT?

Phased implementation is a good start. If you've never made ice cream before, it's probably best to start with plain vanilla. That's a safe strategy for most transit properties: create a BRT system with minimal investments in infrastructure and equipment and prepare to ride the learning curve.

The **Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority** implemented this strategy with great success on the two Metro Rapid routes put into service in 2000. Traffic signal priority helped to reduce travel time by 25%. The branding of the program was done with some effective media relations as well as a distinctive paint scheme on the buses.

Plain vanilla only goes so far, though. Because it can take several years to plan, design and finance a more ambitious BRT system with, say, exclusive busways, smart stations with docking capabilities and off-board fare collection, transit authorities need to get the ball rolling now to reap rewards by the end of the decade.

Reducing the burden

Standardization of the vehicles would help to reduce the risk of manufacturers — and their customers — in meeting the needs of communities. Perhaps a BRT White Book, similar to the **American Public Transportation Association's** Standard Bus Specifications Manual, could be cobbled together by a task force of agencies, manufacturers and interested parties.



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But there's a limit to how much standardization can be absorbed. A cookie-cutter approach will not be embraced by transit agencies that are accustomed to ordering buses with a host of non-standard options and variations. To speed the process, however, transit agencies may need to minimize unusual design requests, such as "curved sides that have a rail-like appearance."

The procurement process may need some refinements as well. The use of performance-based specifications would help manufacturers keep their costs down and improve their delivery times.

The **Federal Transit Administration (FTA)** is a strong enabler of BRT, coordinating demonstration programs in several cities and bringing together bus manufacturers, transit properties and government officials in workshops designed to create an action plan for BRT development.

But there's still a missing link. Unfortunately, it's the most critical link: money. Federal funding is needed to assist in the research and development of BRT vehicles. Domestic bus manufacturers are understandably reluctant to invest large sums of money in the development of a product that may or may not meet the evolving needs of transit agencies.

The FTA could also help speed the development of BRT vehicles by requiring that transit properties make progress payments to manufacturers that are putting their vehicles through testing in Altoona. Cutting down the time required for testing would provide incremental benefits as well.

The success of BRT programs in the U.S. hinges on the ability of bus manufacturers to be flexible in meeting the demands of transit agencies while limiting their exposure in development costs. Building a better rat trap is easy compared to the challenge facing the industry with BRT.