

“Is BRT Just ‘Cheap LRT’?”

### **Abstract**

Many cities are evaluating bus rapid transit (BRT) as either an alternative to light rail projects that FTA placed in the “not recommended” category of evaluated new starts or simply as a “cheap LRT.” This paper argues why the two should not be put in competition with one another, but complement each mode as separate technologies in the toolbox of cities’ urban transportation strategies. An up-to-date survey and status of BRT projects and characteristics will be included. Examples and a proposed “line of definition” between the modes will also be offered.

### **Introduction**

According to at least one account (1), as many as 150 communities in the U.S. are looking at bus rapid transit (BRT) projects. The reasons are myriad, almost as many as the cities studying this approach, because BRT like any mode of transportation must be a solution tailored to each locality’s individual need.

However, many looking at BRT might be pursuing the mode for wrong reasons. When they do so, they risk squandering cost and time that could have been spent on the appropriate solution for their needs. They also squander something else that is particularly precious in times of intense fiscal pressures and competing public-policy needs: credibility with voters.

This paper will look at why various cities are choosing BRT, and discuss both the legitimate and the fallacious rationales for choosing the mode over others. It will also compare BRT’s strengths and weaknesses with those of light rail, the mode it is often pitted against in alternatives analyses and other planning processes. Finally, recommendations for avoiding these pitfalls will be presented.

### **BRT defined**

Like other modes of public transportation, BRT has many guises, meaning different things to different stakeholders in the industry. Indeed, the consensus of opinion in the industry has no gravitated to a definition that encompasses a range of techniques. At the lower cost end is an approach that uses buses with distinctive paint schemes and color-coded marketing and stops/stations along the routes. To the passenger it is a “branded service” that is different from ordinary bus service. This approach also typically employs techniques that make the service special in fact as well as in image, such as the use of fewer stops, signal priority at intersections and/or some other preference in mixed traffic (e.g., stops removed from traffic flow, “queue jumping” techniques that allow buses not only preference by ability to bypass other traffic at intersections, etc.).

At the higher-cost end of the BRT continuum, reserved bus lanes on highways or streets, upgraded shelters at stops, real-time “next bus” passenger information displays, headway-

based scheduling (vs. buses running on a set timetable) and specialized vehicles designed to appear as “trams on tires” rather than conventional buses can be employed to give passengers an experience that is even more removed from bus service and more closely resembles a rail operation. A mix of these techniques is arrayed along a matrix displayed in Table 1.

The aim is perhaps best explained by the definition of BRT articulated on the Federal Transit Administration’s website: “Think Rail, Use Buses.” (2) This explanation is useful for another reason, in that experts and policy makers general now agree that BRT is a bus, not something else in public transportation altogether. (3) It is also important when planners and public officials examine BRT’s strengths and weaknesses in light of other public transportation modes, which will be discussed below.