

RAPID BUSES: FLEXIBLE RAPID TRANSIT FOR THE FUTURE

METRO RAPID BUS

MTA's Red Line subway to North Hollywood recently opened to much fanfare, but will likely have little effect on the lives of most Angelenos. In LA's enormous, sprawling metropolis, any single transit line—no matter how fast or sleek—can only carry a tiny fraction of travel. But another, potentially more significant, form of public transit was recently inaugurated in Southern California as well, but to less hoopla—the Rapid Bus.

The MTA's Metro Rapid Buses began service in June on several major arterials including Wilshire, Whittier, and Ventura boulevards. These buses combine a variety of new technologies to speed them along conventional surface streets. They stop only at major intersections, incorporate low floors for easy boarding, and receive green-light signal priority to substantially reduce waiting times at intersections. These simple features are speeding the new buses by as much as 25 percent over regular buses. Soon, special new bus stops will provide more shelter as well as real-time electronic information on when the next bus will arrive. In contrast with the nearly \$300 million-per-mile Red Line, current Metro Rapid Bus route improvements were implemented

for under \$5 million. Not only do the Metro Buses provide faster rides, but also more frequent service. By operating the same bus fleet 25 percent faster, Rapid Bus' improved turnaround times allow headways to be reduced by 25 percent, thereby enhancing service with little added cost.

Just two short months after commencement of service the Rapid Bus already looks like a winner. According to the MTA, ridership on the Wilshire-Whittier line has risen by 12,000 per weekday and by 5,000 per weekday on the Ventura Boulevard line. The new service began operation with 90 buses on the two lines. But the buses became overcrowded so quickly that the MTA deployed 20 more. Even with these additions, standees are a common sight, especially on the Wilshire-Whittier line. Demand has induced added service, and the added service appears to have induced growing demand. The MTA plans to put longer, accordion-like articulated buses on these lines; more seats and fewer standees should encourage patronage even more. While more data would show ridership change and subsidy figures, the public subsidy per new transit trip appears to be

roughly \$1 and dropping; a bargain in public transit these days.

Further simple enhancements can speed these new buses even more. On crowded lines passengers may pay before boarding at the bus stop to significantly quicken passenger boarding, reducing the time that buses spend at stops. Wider doors can allow for faster loading and unloading. As ridership grows, so does the justification for increasing the green-light signal priority for Rapid Buses. To be most effective, Rapid Buses should be carefully integrated with improved local bus service to take passengers to and from places between Rapid Bus stops. These enhancements could give Metro Rapid Buses 80 percent to 90 percent of the speed advantage subways have over regular buses, at a tiny fraction of the cost. For the cost of just one mile of new subway, hundreds of miles of new Metro Rapid Bus routes can be created, reaching many more communities, and offering riders the benefits of a comprehensive network of service. If the taxpayer dollars expended on any of the recently opened rail transit lines in LA had been spent on Rapid Bus service instead, the entire metropolitan area could be blanketed

with frequent, affordable service carrying many more transit passengers than today.

Rapid Bus systems have been a spectacular success in Curitiba, Brazil. Here in the U.S., Rapid Bus service recently started in Honolulu and will soon be operating in Washington, D.C. Why is Rapid Bus better for Los Angeles than rail? Rail transit works best in densely developed cities like Hong Kong, Moscow, Tokyo, and Mexico City, where parking is limited, freeways are rare, and most people live and work near rail stations. But in Los Angeles, travel patterns are dispersed and difficult to serve with just a few roads or rail lines. Thus, rail transit — no matter how well-operated — can't make good use of its ability to move large numbers of people in the same direction at the same time. Rapid Bus technology allows for the rapid service benefits of subways to be spread over a much larger proportion of urbanized Los Angeles County. Best of all, Rapid Bus service does not require decades to design and build expensive new infrastructure; the service can be up and running in dozens of communities in a very short time within current budget limitations. 🚌

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