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RAPID BUS ADDS OPTION BETWEEN S.D., N. COUNTY; Buses run more often, stops limited

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A new bus service that promises to whisk passengers between North County and downtown San Diego is set to launch on Sunday as part of a nearly \$240 million transportation investment, much of it along the Interstate 15 corridor.

While it's not cheap or guaranteed to thrive, transit and taxpayer advocates said they welcome the new service — branded “Rapid” — partly because it's less expensive than building a new commuter rail line along I-15.

They said they don't expect the buses to persuade throngs of suburbanites to give up their cars, but noted it provides one more option for getting around, particularly for students and seniors.

It's “much more cost-effective than new trolley lines,” said Sean Karafin, interim president of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association. “We'll be monitoring how much faster this specific new service is than traditional bus lines, and how much transit riders take advantage of it. We are optimistic about this approach.”

The new buses will run every 15 minutes during weekday rush hours and every half-hour during non-rush hours and on weekends. They add to the MTS “Premium Express” bus service already offered during rush hours in North County, which links commuters to job centers in San Diego.

The difference between Rapid and the existing service is that the new buses will operate much more often, seven days a week from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m., with limited stops in Escondido, Rancho Bernardo, Sabre Springs, Mira Mesa, Kearny Mesa, City Heights and downtown San Diego. It will eliminate the need for transfers and shave one to two hours off some midday bus trips, officials said.

The buses, painted red, white and black with padded, front-facing seats, will travel on the I-15 Express Lanes to save time. Those lanes are closed off to most traffic and open to carpools and fee-paying solo drivers.

A pilot project is expected to add Wi-Fi to some of the buses by the end of this year.

The San Diego Association of Governments, the region's transportation agency, has spent much of the \$240 million upgrading North County transit and park and ride stations to prepare for the bus service. SANDAG planned and financed the project using Trans-Net, the countywide half-cent sales tax, along with state and federal dollars.

Transportation officials have launched an aggressive marketing campaign for the new system, using door hangers, radio advertisements and freeway billboards sporting Rapid's "One Sweet Ride," slogan, a website and large advertisements on local buses.

"If you don't tell people what their travel choices are, they won't try them," said Gary Gallegos, SANDAG's executive director.

SANDAG has spent about \$270,000 so far marketing the service, said Colleen Windsor, the agency's spokeswoman. She said it expects to spend roughly an additional \$700,000 over the next three years.

This fall, Rapid lines are expected to open connecting San Diego State University through Mid-City to downtown San Diego, and linking Rancho Bernardo through Mira Mesa to Sorrento Mesa and UC San Diego.

In 2016, a South County route should open connecting the Otay Mesa Port of Entry through eastern Chula Vista to downtown San Diego.

During Rapid's first year, SANDAG estimates the new Escondido-to-downtown San Diego service will have a daily ridership of between 3,000 and 5,000.

For the Rancho Bernardo-to-UC San Diego line that starts in September, ridership is expected to be between 2,000 and 3,000.

Given the stigma some attach to the bus, officials could have a difficult time persuading passengers with cars to try the new offering, Gallegos said.

Even for those open to the service, like retiree Al Castillo of Escondido, the bus routes have to work for them.

"If you're going to one specific spot and that's all you're going to, it would make sense," Castillo said, pausing at the Escondido Transit Center this week. "But speaking for myself, it wouldn't be the most practical thing."

Some have asked why the region invested in buses but not a rail line along I-15.

Gallegos said SANDAG studied and rejected a rail plan in the 1990s in favor of building the I-15 Express Lanes, which added four lanes to the middle of the freeway for more than \$1 billion. Low ridership, hilly terrain and high cost estimates stopped the rail idea from proceeding.

Dave Dobbs, executive director of Light Rail Now!, an Austin-based nonprofit that often advocates for light-rail over bus systems, said SANDAG probably made the right choice along the I-15 corridor. The area's geography and spread-out neighborhoods make it more aligned with a bus network, he said.

"I think (Rapid) is a reasonable approach," he said. "All around, given the additional connectivity and convenience it provides, this project looks like a service that will be well patronized. I look forward to trying it the next time I am in San Diego.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute who studies mass transit systems, agreed that San Diego's launch into a rapid bus system is the right approach, at least compared with rail.

He noted that cities such as Las Vegas and Kansas City have generated significant ridership increases by improving their bus networks, as San Diego's initiative seeks to do.

One local transit advocate summed up the new service's future this way: "The Rapid service will only be effective if people actually ride it. With trip times that compete with driving to downtown, it's definitely worth people giving it a try to see how transit can change the quality of their commute on the 15," said Elyse Lowe of Circulate San Diego, which pushes for alternatives to driving.