



The pros and cons of ABQ bus rapid transit

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In the ongoing debate surrounding plans to transform Central Avenue via bus rapid transit – with dedicated bus lanes and median stations – there are almost as many questions as there are federal dollars being applied for.

And specific answers about what Albuquerque would actually get for 80 million in federal and 20 million in city tax dollars have been almost as hard to locate as a city bus on a Sunday night.

At a forum this month designed to lay out the potential return on investment, nearly 100 folks showed up at the University of New Mexico School of Law, ready to question the sanity of cutting Central's driving lanes in half or defend the long-term payoff of a better-built environment.

So I gathered some common concerns voiced in the 90-minute discussion and took them to City Hall (which is pushing the project), a Cato Institute senior fellow (who spoke in town this week against the project) and a millennial who advocates for equitable planning policy (and is in the project's target demographic).

Buckle up, folks; with this impromptu panel, there are bound to be sudden stops.

1. There is already a bus system on Central. Why duplicate it?

Dayna Crawford, deputy director of the city's Transit Department, says the Rapid Ride bus routes on Central are "often at capacity, delayed by traffic and degraded the timeliness of service."

In addition, those "Rapid Ride buses are past their useful life" and are ready to be taken off the streets. The bus rapid transit system would have passengers pay before they board (no logjam at the fare box), walk straight on (no steps) and be safer because stations would be on the medians so riders would cross only half the street at designated crosswalks with signals.

The buses would run every 7 to 8 minutes from 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. between Unser and Louisiana, and every 15 minutes to Uptown and to Tramway. After 7:30 p.m., to the end of service hours, these times would be 10 minutes and 20 minutes, respectively.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who works on urban growth, public land and transportation issues, says BRT is all about redevelopment, not transit, and the future of mass transit lies in ridesharing. As such, taxpayers should keep the current bus system going but not "put a lot of money into capital improvements that will take decades to recover."

And Dan Majewski, who has worked as a bicycle route planner for Tucson, a route planner and mapmaker for ABQ Ride and now is co-chairman of UrbanABQ, says, "Continued development along this corridor mean(s) more traffic and therefore less reliable buses. Providing a dedicated (bus) lane will mean much more reliable, rapid and frequent service."

2. Bus rapid transit – aka Albuquerque Rapid Transit – would destroy Nob Hill/Route 66.

Crawford says a major concern of merchants and neighbors has been improving the pedestrian environment with wider sidewalks and more landscaping, and a recent retail study recommends reducing traffic to one lane in each direction. "The ART project will accomplish these two major objectives while maintaining on-street parking."

O'Toole says that "taking car lanes away for buses reduces the number of people (and) the kind of people" in the area and that "giving priority to buses hurts the 99 percent" who drive, encouraging motorists to just avoid the area. "You get a few more people riding," he says "and a lot less total traffic in the area."

And Majewski says, "The planners are making sure to do everything in their power to make sure everyone using every mode can still access every location along Central. Realistically, accommodating the automobile over every other mode has a huge negative impact on vibrant, walkable economic development. Places like Nob Hill will thrive even more once the BRT comes in because auto traffic will move much more slowly throughout the corridor."

3. I don't drive on Central, so why would I want to spend \$100 million on a system there?

Crawford says "the Central corridor ART project is the first step in providing the city with a modern transit network" that would include "a north-south ART connection from the Sunport to the University Health Sciences Center along University Boulevard (and may also) run along Coors and Paseo del Norte and Bridge Boulevard, providing a solid backbone to citywide transportation."

O'Toole says the \$100 million infrastructure investment shuffles growth to one part of town and lacks a plan to cover the subsequent high-dollar maintenance obligations.

And Majewski says the ART "intersects with most other bus routes in this city, therefore providing a mobility improvement which will ripple citywide."

4. The current bus system doesn't run at night or much on weekends. Fix that first.

Crawford says “the current bus system does indeed run at night. The Route 66 Central runs until nearly 1 a.m. June through September, and the current Rapid Ride routes run until about 9:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Sunday service on all routes ends about 6 p.m.”

O'Toole says BRT spends “a lot of money on middle-class people, and the people without cars are the ones who get hurt.” A more cost-effective transit plan would be to “expand Rapid Ride (with) more destinations, more neighborhoods, get more riders and look at double-decker buses” that carry more passengers but have a smaller footprint than the accordion buses.

And Majewski says adding service hours is “part of the federal grant application” and the \$80 million in federal money “can only be spent on specific projects – it can't be used to simply ‘improve the system’ (so) we're using \$20 million (in city dollars) to leverage \$80 million. That's a great ROI! ... Some city will be getting that \$80 million no matter what. It might as well be us!”

It's important to keep asking questions – and getting answers – about the proposed ART, so if the feds do send that \$80 million here, taxpayers get something real for that expenditure instead of getting taken for a ride.