

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## 'Bus rapid transit' link from Oakland to Downtown slow to actualize

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Six years of discussions and almost \$6 million in public money are behind a proposal to build a dedicated transit link between Oakland and Downtown. But key details, including the precise route, ridership levels and the economic impact on Uptown, are still more than a year away, and the \$200 million project hinges on securing federal funding.

The “bus rapid transit” concept — known as BRT — brings subway-like efficiency to above-ground bus routes. Dedicated lanes, stations and traffic signals provide faster service than ordinary bus stops.

At least \$5.6 million in public money is committed to planning the project, including \$1.6 million from the city, and a combined \$4 million from the county and Port Authority to conduct environmental studies and engineering plans.

“We won't figure this all out in one fell swoop,” said Grant Ervin, Pittsburgh's sustainability manager. “It's no doubt a complex process, but we feel it's kind of an innovative way to approach neighborhood reinvestment with a proposed infrastructure improvement.”

Pittsburgh's BRT Stakeholder's Advisory Committee started meeting in 2009 to discuss the pros, cons and challenges of using transit to connect the “eds and meds” economies of Downtown and Oakland.

“One of the struggles we've had with the bus rapid transit alternative is looking at those connections between transportation and land use,” said Wanda Wilson, executive director for the Oakland Planning and Development Corp.

The city is leading efforts to make the corridor a Transit Revitalization Investment District (TRID), a state designation that dedicates property tax revenue to capital projects. Ervin said the city plans to secure a design firm to start planning the TRID in mid-April.

Plans could take as long as a year and a half to finalize. From there, the agencies would seek one of several federal funding options.

Port Authority hired Parsons Brinckerhoff, a Downtown-based planning firm, to complete an environmental and engineering review on the route and determine its course along Fifth and Forbes avenues.

Wilson is waiting on results from the studies to provide more community input.

“It's really unclear exactly which alternative is feasible,” Wilson said.

The target for a final decision on the route is summer 2016, said Port Authority spokesman Jim Ritchie.

“When you're looking at getting things ready to go after federal funding to support the project, there are several pieces that have to all come together about that time,” he said. “Funding is one of them. Alignment is another.”

Randal O'Toole, a transportation analyst with the Cato Institute, is critical of transit investments of this magnitude. The development boost local officials seek stems from tax breaks and subsidies they use to attract new builders — not the project itself, he said.

“There are a lot of bus rapid transit systems that have increased ridership, but none have generated new economic development,” he said. “You would've gotten all that development if you'd given them those stimuli without building bus or rail lines.”

One of the federal funding options is the New Starts and Small Starts program, which is supporting 17 bus rapid transit projects from San Jose to Chicago to Boston, according to the Federal Transit Administration. County Executive Rich Fitzgerald said he envisions Pittsburgh's project as similar to Cleveland's, where a BRT connects the university center to the business district along Euclid Avenue.

That project, while longer than the three-mile stretch under consideration here, took six years to build, from final design to service, according to the federal government. It attracted \$5.8 billion in development, according to the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy.

Fitzgerald said he expects Downtown workers to ride the BRT to meetings in Oakland rather than drive and park.

Court Gold, executive director from Sustainable Pittsburgh involved in the stakeholder group, said the goal is to turn Uptown into an “eco-innovation district,” with environmentally friendly infrastructure and access for pedestrians and bicyclists. The BRT system, he said, can be “a shot in the arm” for the economically depressed neighborhood.

“BRT is not positioned as just a transportation project but rather a community revitalization, quality of life and transportation access project,” he said.