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Contact: Dani Simons 646-380-2348 (o) / 203-980-8820 (m) / dsimons@itdp.org

U.S. Cities Reinventing Buses as Modern, Efficient, and Effective

Study rates 5 U.S. cities on the cutting edge of bus innovation; 3 more poised to take the lead

A new independent study, issued by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy rates Los Angeles, Cleveland, Las Vegas, Eugene and Pittsburgh as the nation's leading cities for bus-based transportation because of their high-quality bus rapid transit systems (BRT). BRT combines the flexibility of buses with the speed and priority of light rail, but at a fraction of the cost of rail. The study rates three new BRT systems currently in planning in the San Francisco Bay Area, Montgomery County, Maryland and Chicago as the best prospects to achieve an even higher "gold-standard" BRT, something that does not currently exist in the United States.

"These systems are poised to redefine how Americans see and use buses, critical at a time of increasingly scarce transportation funding," says Walter Hook, ITDP Executive Director. "But based on what we've seen in our work in cities around the world, we think there's still more that could be done. Getting at least one truly world-class BRT system built in the U.S. could inspire cities around the country to rethink the way they use buses in the fight against increasing traffic congestion and rising fuel prices."

Transit ridership in the U.S. is at a five-decade record high, with buses accounting for over half of those trips. But according to the American Public Transportation Association, U.S. buses travel at a nationwide average speed of 12.5 mph. And passengers must often contend with limited service frequency, and with buses that don't always run according to schedule.

These unforeseen delays and slow speeds are a result of a number of factors including traffic congestion and boarding delays, but as shown in ITDP's new report, *Recapturing Global Leadership in Bus Rapid Transit*, they can be addressed, making buses a fast and efficient mode of transportation once more.

"BRT projects can be put in place quickly, and integrate well with other transportation modes, from subways to cycling and walking, while fitting today's often constrained budgets," says Rep. Earl Blumenauer, of the U.S. House of Representatives (D-OR). "Now more than ever it is important to find creative solutions to provide affordable transportation options that meet the needs of our communities and residents and keep our economy moving forward."

"The growth of gold-standard BRT in cities throughout the United States will mean better and more transportation options for more people," says Benjamin de la Peña, Associate Director

9 East 19th Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10003
Tel: (212) 629-8001 • Fax: (646) 380-2360
www.itdp.org • e-mail: mobility@itdp.org

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at the Rockefeller Foundation. “BRT provides a new tool for cities who, now more than ever, must make transportation investments that really deliver and really count. BRT will allow cities to rapidly expand transportation options and will not only mean more equitable transportation for all, but will increase the resilience of our households and cities in the face of crisis. We have already seen how cost-effective BRT is around the world—in terms of value added to cities for dollars invested—and this report shows us that cities throughout the US have the potential to create robust and trail-blazing BRT systems.”

The report finds that some U.S. cities already have high-quality BRT including:

Los Angeles, CA: The Orange Line offers a separated busway, off-board fare collection, and buses arriving every four minutes in rush hour to provide high-quality service and attract new passengers, carrying 22,000 passengers a day.

Cleveland, OH: The HealthLine has dedicated bus lanes, off-board fare collection, and at-level boarding, and has resulted in average time savings of 12 minutes from end-to-end of the route. Ridership is up 60% as compared to the bus line that previously served the corridor, and it is spurring new development along the corridor.

Eugene, OR: The Emerald Express (EmX) has off-board fare collection and near-level boarding making it quicker and easier to hop on. Dedicated right-of-way through Eugene’s most congested areas, signal priority, improved station design, and wide stop spacing make buses 30% faster than before.

Las Vegas, NV: A network of BRT routes connects residents from low-density neighborhoods to jobs and destinations in the busy downtown, using dedicated bus lanes. The entire system has off-board fare collection and high-quality station design, making it an attractive option.

Pittsburgh, PA: The East Busway is a separated busway, enabling buses to reach speeds of up to 35 mph. It is unique in that it includes multiple routes (both local and express) that minimize transfers, resulting in bus frequencies of every two minutes during peak hours.

Three cities have BRT systems on the horizon, which may reach “gold standard” including:

Chicago, IL: Incoming Mayor Rahm Emmanuel made BRT a cornerstone of his campaign platform and his transition plan promises that “maximum impact will be achieved by dedicated bus lanes, signal preemption, pre-paid boarding or on-board fare verification, multiple entry and exit points on the buses, limited stops, and at-grade boarding.”

Montgomery County, MD: A recently-released feasibility study conducted by the County’s Department of Transportation estimates that a 150-mile BRT system, with

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high-level boarding, special stops, high frequency service, and reserved lanes in some areas could increase transit ridership by 11%, taking 85,000 cars off the congested roadways in the Washington, D.C. area. The system could be in place by as early as 2014.

San Francisco Bay Area, CA: The Bay Area has several bold BRT projects on deck. The city of San Francisco is planning two BRT lines to modernize two very congested bus corridors downtown. The East Bay is moving forward with a high-quality BRT plan through the highest-demand streets in Oakland and San Leandro. These initiatives will help to redefine transit throughout the Bay Area.

Recapturing Global Leadership in Bus Rapid Transit documents the challenges that these and other cities face in implementing BRT, including lack of public awareness of BRT, lack of political will for building bus-based transit, and outdated traffic design standards that sometimes hinder system design and implementation.

The report suggests that a clearer and more widely-accepted definition of what BRT is would increase public understanding of and demand for this high-quality transportation option. The report outlines the *BRT Standard*, a first-generation attempt at defining a scoring system (along the lines of the LEED rating system for green buildings), which ranks BRT systems as gold, silver, or bronze.

The report was funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The full report as well as a map of cities with BRT around the world can be downloaded at ITDP.org.

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About the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy

Founded in 1985, the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy works with cities worldwide to bring about sustainable transport solutions that cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce poverty, and improve the quality of urban life.

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