

# A Bus by Any Other Name is Still ... a Train?

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February 2004 · Rev. January 2006

There's a very strange thing happening in public transportation planning and PR hype. Didn't you always think there was a rather enormous and important difference between a bus and a train?

We always thought so, too – after all, one rides on rubber tires on streets and roads, and the other usually rides on steel wheels on railway tracks. And buses run as single vehicles, with one driver per bus (expensive) while railcars can be coupled in ... well, trains, with one driver for several cars (cheaper). But apparently a lot of planners, decision makers, bus vendors, and journalists have started to get confused about the differences between the two modes of transportation.

Of course, it's no secret that rail transit has a whole bunch of that elusive "it" that city leaders, and transportation planners, crave – that *je ne sais quoi* excitement and attractiveness for the public which pulls riders out of their SUVs and Lexuses and aboard public transit services. Rail transit has a wide array of attractive features – starting with speed, of course, but also including riding comfort, spaciousness, dependability, reliability, sense of safety, and more – which appeal to the public.

And the public certainly have been responding to that appeal – climbing aboard new LRT trains, for example, in droves, and causing actual ridership figures, on average, to exceed forecasts (by as much as 22%, in one study by transportation engineer E. L. Tennyson). (See our articles [Light Rail's Besieged With Riders! This is a Problem? ... Light Rail's Stunning Track Record in Meeting – and Exceeding – Ridership Projections ... Rail Transit Accounted for 84% of US Transit Passenger-Mile Growth, 1990-2000. Any Questions?](#))

So it's not exactly a mystery why other cities, and other transit agencies, would like to emulate that success. But some transit industry people seem to have been smacked with what they apparently think is a very clever idea: ***Why spend the money on rail, when you can just take a bus ... and call it a train?***

## Transforming lead into gold

This seems to be a lot of what's happening in the current promotion of "Bus Rapid Transit" – "BRT" – spearheaded by the US Federal Transit Administration (FTA), whose "BRT" marketing website has carried the resounding slogan "Think Rail, Use Buses". "That's the quickest way to describe Bus Rapid Transit" says the FTA. "BRT combines the quality of rail transit and the flexibility of buses."

But some promoters have been going even further – transforming buses into railcars in their promotional and marketing hype, much like ancient alchemists transformed lead into gold ... In their imaginations. Some bus vendors have really pushed the envelope. The transit products vendor MATRA, for example, promotes its optically-guided CIVIS

bus as "the rubber-tired tramway" and claims, "CIVIS combines comfort and regularity of a street car and the operating simplicity of a bus."

Some journalists also have gotten on the "bus is rail" bandwagon – claiming that, in "BRT" systems, "buses operate like trains on rubber tires." Similarly, syndicated columnist Neal Peirce has started promoting "BRT" services as "surface subways". But, while Peirce supports transit and undoubtedly means well, his effort at terminology obfuscation is rather reminiscent of some Road Warriors who like to anoint the private automobile as "personal rapid transit".

## **Boston's Silver Line: "rapid transit" or just another bus line?**

Picking up the "rubber-tire subway" theme, Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (the "T") has gone a step further with its new Washington St. "BRT", christening it the "Silver Line" to try to position it as just another rapid transit line along with the city's elevated and subway lines, Green Line LRT system, and regional rail services. But, as they watch the latest crop of big articulated Silver Line buses lumbering through traffic, and in and out of badly enforced "reserved" lanes, many residents and community leaders in the Washington St. corridor haven't been convinced. Some of them, having long been lobbying MBTA for *real* rail transit, have dubbed the new service the "Silver Lie".

Khalida Smalls, an activist with the T Riders Union, dismissed the "rapid transit" Silver Line with disdain: "The key word here, is bus. They took the #49 [bus route], painted it silver, and hoped no one would notice it wasn't a train."

[*Weekly Dig*, 29 Jan. 2003]

Bob Terrell, executive director of the pro-rail Washington Street Corridor Coalition, has described the MBTA's Silver Line campaign as a case of deceptive advertising: "The T used the terminology 'Silver Line' to convey the impression that it's the equivalent of a rapid transit line. By using the term 'Silver' – like Red, Blue, Green and Orange – you make people think it's a rail line" he complained. To a reporter, Terrell also related how, during the kickoff party on the Silver Line's opening day, an MBTA police officer came up to him and asked, "Where are the tracks?"

[*Weekly Dig*, 26 Feb 2003]

Despite all the folderol about "rapid transit" and "just like rail", MBTA management seem very well aware that the Silver Line is *not* a rail project. "it's essentially a road project" acknowledged MBTA then-general manager Robert Prince to *Mass Transit* magazine in a 2000 interview, when the Washington St. project was still under construction. "We're working in conjunction with Massachusetts Highway to redo the street and put the dedicated right-of-way down."

[*Mass Transit*, November/December 2000]

## **Atlanta "BRT": "train-like bus"?**

Atlanta seems to be another city lately infected by the contagious "Bus is rail. Rail is bus" newspeak. There, suburban movers and shakers in and around the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) have blithely written off bona fide rail transit options and have been pushing a "BRT" plan running in either HOV lanes or exclusive arterial lanes

which could, one must note, be ultimately opened to broader motor vehicle traffic in the future (as has similarly been done with other such operations, like in Houston and Los Angeles). But this lucrative highway industry project is *not* being presented as just another *bus* plan – it's being presented as a *train* project:

"Those who like the proposal to run rubber-tired buses designed to ride like trains in the high-occupancy-vehicle lanes of I-75 stress that this alternative moves the most passengers for the smallest investment of money" relates a recent article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (19 Jan. 2004). Similarly, the suburban *Gwinnett County Post* really got carried away when it described the ARC *bus* plan with the headline "Transit rail would link county, Cobb". The article went on to dutifully disseminate the official transit newspeak:

Within eight years, Gwinnettians could get to Cobb County by hopping on a train-like bus that would travel on dedicated lanes beside interstate 285. Known as bus-rapid transit, the rubber-tired buses that function like trains are the type of mass transit regional planners would use to move commuters along the top end of I-285.  
[*Gwinnett Daily Post*, 23 January 2004]

And the Journal-Constitution editors themselves seem to have been sucked into the smoke-and-mirrors realm of the suburban project backers:

A bus by any other name is still just a bus, right? Unless, of course, it's called a "flex trolley" or "bus rapid transit." in that case, these train-like buses may be the best, least expensive way to ease traffic along the top end of I-285, one of metro Atlanta's most infamously congested stretches of highway.  
[*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 20 Jan. 2004]

Perhaps all this bus-is-train blather is reassuring a few among the higher echelons of Atlanta's power elite ... but is it really doing a service to the taxpaying public? For all the talk about "train-like buses" as the supposedly "least expensive way" to move passengers, the *facts* seem to speak otherwise. According to the latest figures (2002) from the FTA's own National Transit Database, Atlanta's MARTA transit agency is carrying its rail transit riders at *less than half the cost* per passenger-mile that it is carrying bus riders: \$0.24 per p-m by rail vs. \$0.54 per p-m by bus in 2002.

And are passengers flocking to buses or to real trains? According to the same source, MARTA's rail services carry about 63% of the total passenger-mileage of the system's two major modes. On average, each railcar is attracting nearly *twice* as many riders as each bus (21.6 for rail vs. 11.3 for bus). And that's with the extensive "BRT"-type express and limited stop bus services already operated by MARTA and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. Would redefining this kind of bus service as a "train-like bus" and promoting it as "Bus Rapid Transit" *really* inspire the public to crowd aboard, and cut the operating cost in half?

### **San Fernando Valley Busway: "rail on rubber tires"?**

And, for a final recent example of the "bus equals train" newspeak craze, there's Los Angeles, where the LA County MTA (the major transit agency) has just decided "to rechristen a 14-mile bus corridor in the San Fernando Valley as the Metro Orange Line." Transit advocates attending the MTA meeting were exasperated, noting that the busway

has already gone from being called the "East-West Busway", to the "Metro Rapid Transitway", and, just before the latest change, the "Metro Rapidway".

But their biggest gripe seemed to be that using the color designation (a la Boston's Silver Line) would confuse the public into thinking this was part of the region's rail system. As the *Los Angeles Times* (23 January 2004) reported, "...transit advocates say the name change seems more like a case of identity crisis for the busway, and it will only confuse the public."

"I don't understand this.... This will not be user-friendly. This will be user-confusing" complained transit advocate Kymberleigh Richards, described as "throwing up her hands." "This isn't even going to be a rail line" she added.

But LA County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, the MTA's board chairman, was ready to assure the audience "It is like a rail line on rubber tires."

### **Are they fooling anybody?**

Well, it's all just words. And certainly, words are things politicians love to play with.

But one has to wonder: is anybody really fooled by all this hanky-panky to repackage the bus? Evidently, some planners, transit officials, and politicians (and perhaps a few journalists) may be fooling somebody – mainly themselves. But, by and large, the public probably respond to real, perceptible, qualitative differences between the kinds of systems and vehicles they're being asked to ride around in.

And, to be sure, most people probably *know* there are definite differences between buses and rail vehicles. Railcars tend to be more spacious. Boarding is usually easier and faster. Ride quality on rails is immensely smoother (because even the best pavement degenerates, producing rough, uneven movement). There are reasons that new LRT lines are practically overwhelmed with passengers.

Even if some planners like to pretend otherwise, there are also major operational differences which impact efficiency and the bottom line. Railcars can be much longer than buses, and they can be coupled in trains. That means easier boarding for passengers, and lower operating costs because fewer operators are needed. in icy conditions, trains typically operate more reliably. And, when buses are actually put on their own right-of-way "like trains", the capital and way-maintenance costs are as much as, or possibly more than, those of bona fide rail transit.

Certainly, both buses and rail services have major niches, major roles to fill in the fabric of urban mobility. But, at a time when transit agencies desperately need to build public trust, trying to hoodwink people by passing off buses as "trains" does not seem conducive to fulfilling that need.

in the end, what will hopefully happen is that the real *advantages* of rail transit – such as the potential for lowering unit operating costs – will bring some sense to the planning process and dissipate the fantasies currently in vogue. in Boston, the operating cost per passenger-mile of LRT was 32% cheaper than bus; of rail rapid transit, 55% cheaper;

and of regional rail, 70% cheaper (2002). in LA, LRT was 24% cheaper than bus; rail rapid transit, 22% cheaper; and regional rail, 22% cheaper.

With a bit of luck, maybe such a return to dollars-and-sense reality will occur before too many dubious decisions are made, and projects launched, from planning in the world of make-believe.

Light Rail Now! website  
Updated 2006/01/15