

PAR POSITION ON A GEARY CORRIDOR BUS RAPID TRANSIT SYSTEM (BRT)

To assure that public transit on Geary is improved before incurring the significant and unknown costs and disruptions from constructing the proposed BRT system based on inadequate data, PAR urges a two-phase approach. In Phase One, Alternative 2A (i.e. "Basic Plus-Plus") as described below should be implemented. Then, in Phase Two, using actual performance data from Phase One operations as the baseline, the potential additional benefits of the full BRT system should be evaluated. Only after a finding of significant additional benefits and resolving key design issues should a decision be made to implement the full BRT system.

Background

The San Francisco County Transportation Authority's (SFCTA's) April 2007 draft report entitled *Geary Corridor Bus Rapid Transit Study* states: "... the 2003 voter-approved transportation sales tax measure, Prop K, identified Geary as one of the key links in (the City's) rapid transit network, and allocated funding for major improvements to Geary including a potential bus rapid transit project." (page 1-1)

The study proceeds to ask (on page 1-2) "Why Bus Rapid Transit?" (i.e., among other potential, but unspecified, alternatives). It then lists six broad areas of benefits (or improvements) that can be expected from a BRT system (without providing any comparative data with other alternatives) and offers five alternatives, two would continue with the present bus system (one with a few improvements) and three would construct alternate new BRT systems in various configurations. (By "BRT Systems" we mean a bus traveling on a dedicated lane with features that reduce travel time.)

The study also states that any of the three BRT Systems "may be deployed (incrementally or) in phases based on funding availability and demand". It also notes that the current bus system on Geary could also be improved incrementally before deciding to incur the significant costs (i.e., from \$157 to \$212 million) and disruptions from constructing an entirely new BRT System that, as described subsequently, still has major unresolved issues.

Phase One

PAR is urging that, in Phase 1, an Alternative 2A (i.e., a "Basic Plus-Plus" alternative) be selected and implemented immediately. The Phase 1 service improvements would include:

- θ Transit Signal Priority at some signals.
- θ Low floor buses.
- θ Real-time information at some stops.
- θ Increased enforcement of bus zones.
- θ Longer bus stops where needed.
- θ Bus bulbs at some stops.

- θ Dedicated bus lanes in peak hours and directions.

- θ Level boarding (which should be a benefit of low floor buses).
- θ Pedestrian safety and amenities.
- θ Bus stop enhancements.
- θ Expanded hours of limited and express service.

Citywide Improvements

The study identified certain system improvements under consideration for the entire Municipal Railway (MUNI) system (i.e., not limited to just the Geary Corridor) that would improve performance citywide. If these improvements are implemented, they would also enhance service on Geary and/or cut travel times, whether or not a BRT System is built. Such additional improvements could include:

- θ Proof of payment and multi-door boarding.
- θ Ticket vending machines at selected bus stops and potentially elsewhere.
- θ Modifications to existing labor agreements that would provide greater confidence in the availability of requisite numbers of appropriate personnel.

The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) System recommended such service improvements in 1974 in its *Northwest San Francisco Rapid Transit Extension Study* but many have still not been implemented. PAR urges implementation of such improvements on Geary buses (and elsewhere) as part of Phase 1.

Phase Two

After implementation of Phase 1, PAR recommends a phase of data gathering and detailed planning and evaluation that would include the following:

- θ Baseline performance data for bus service on Geary Boulevard be captured after all of the service improvements listed in Phase 1 have been fully implemented. These information would be compared with the projected performance data of the BRT system, and the benefits would be weighed against all costs and disruptions of constructing a new BRT System, before a final decision is made to implement BRT
- θ Two critical design/engineering plans should be developed with full public review and impute: (i) how a BRT System on Geary Boulevard should intersect with and serve the neighborhoods and businesses around Masonic Avenue and Fillmore Street, and (ii) how a BRT System would function east of Van Ness Avenue.
- θ Alternative resolutions of how a BRT system should function east of Van Ness Avenue should be developed and vetted publicly.
- θ The proposed consolidation of local stops should be evaluated in light of the City's general policies promoting multiple local neighborhood-based retail businesses as opposed to fewer, larger, and more dispersed, formula retail business establishments.
- θ More extensive and detailed studies should be undertaken and vetted publicly about how the different BRT system alternatives on Geary Boulevard would affect traffic, parking and safety on that street and on adjoining neighborhood streets.

- θ More extensive and detailed studies should be undertaken and vetted publicly about how the disruptions caused by the construction of a new BRT System and attendant costs can be mitigated or eliminated altogether.

Prior to deciding to launch BRT, in addition to completing the studies and analyses described above, the SFCTA needs to make explicit its commitment to MUNI service along the Geary corridor and on parallel routes so that the benefits of a BRT System can be evaluated in conjunction with the level of services available to riders. This includes plans for the various service levels on Geary Boulevard (local and express) as well as bus service on the parallel streets (California, Clement and Balboa). We note that all three BRT System alternatives are intended to replace the current “limited” service, and that the SFCTA study explicitly provides (on pages 4-3 and 4-10) that “local” service in the current system would continue to operate either in a new BRT center lane or in the current curbside lane. If the former, it needs to be demonstrated how the two modes of service (i.e., “limited” and “local”) could operate in the same dedicated BRT lane without offsetting any potential performance improvements. If the later, it needs to be demonstrated how “local” service in the curbside lane would not obviate the projected benefits from any of the BRT alternatives. Further, if there is any intent to retain “express” service, it could not be located in the SFCTA study.

Need for a Two Phase Approach

The image of unimpeded, predictable and comfortable transit from the Richmond District to downtown described for a BRT System is attractive, even seductive. However, the reality is that there are many unanswered questions in the Report, including what service levels will be provided and how BRT would work at key intersections and east of Van ness Avenue. Moreover, MUNI as currently operated, is unreliable; concerns about the negative impacts of a prolonged construction period on Geary businesses are valid and have not been addressed; and the spill-over of traffic from Geary to neighboring residential streets both during construction and after one traffic lane is dedicated to buses are serious issues for many residents. Further, we are concerned about the more than a hundred trees along the Geary median that will be removed to construct new BRT lanes and bus stops, and are doubtful that they can be replaced successfully with new trees that arch above the buses (as shown in the BRT drawings).

PAR believes that a two-phase approach could eliminate the need for an environmental impact report prior to instituting key changes that would provide immediate service improvements for MUNI riders along Geary Boulevard. The two-phased approach will lead to lower costs, fewer disruptions, and an opportunity to obtain key information for evaluating the benefits of the BRT alternatives in Phase 2, without affecting the overall timeline should BRT be implemented.

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