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BRT isn't your grandmother's bus

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Buses are thought of as the ride of last resort.

Slower than cars and trains, they often are a set of wheels for people who can't afford their own.

So why are they being considered among the six possible solutions to improve travel in the Tappan Zee Bridge/Interstate 287 corridor?

This 30-mile stretch of highway is the gateway to a shoppers paradise in West Nyack, headquarters of the Platinum Mile's countless corporations and home to million-dollar high-rise condominiums in White Plains.

"Buses have developed an unfortunate stigma for being transportation for poor people who can't afford cars," said Joe Grossman, a database administrator who lives in Montebello and rides an NJ Transit train to work in lower Manhattan. "Trains, on the other hand, are something commuters from Connecticut and Westchester take to work. ... It's racist and it's unfair, but it's nevertheless a perception shared by a majority of Rockland residents."

Grossman, who grew up taking the subway in New York City, favors rail across the corridor because he finds trains provide a more pleasant ride.

While soccer moms and dads may be leery about leaving the comfort of their cars to hop on a bus, Bus Rapid Transit isn't your grandmother's bus. This is the tricked-out, pimp-your-ride version of a bus. These buses make fewer stops and move faster than cars or buses in mixed traffic.

Fares for Bus Rapid Transit are collected faster, either off the bus or through an electronic collection system. They have a more upscale image than regular buses, more comfortable rides, briefer station stops and accurate, real-time arrival and departure information at stations, such as "next bus in four minutes."

These buses travel in their own lanes to bypass tie-ups. As they approach an intersection, they use technology to change the traffic signal from red to green to keep moving.

"You should see a 30 percent increase in speed," said Dennis Hinebaugh, director of the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute at the University of South Florida. "This could knock 10 to 15 minutes off a one-hour trip. This is closer to the speed of an auto. Because you're not getting stuck in traffic, buses will be more

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predictable. They are much more reliable than driving your car, in that it has its own lane, so if there's a significant traffic backup, BRT will keep going. It's proven throughout the world."

In the past decade, new systems have been built in Los Angeles; Oakland, Calif.; Las Vegas; Eugene, Ore.; and Cleveland, among others.

Daniel B. Hess, an assistant professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Buffalo University, SUNY, said transportation planners were working hard to brand BRT as a fast, new, sexy transit service. They've adopted flashy names such as Metro Rapid in Los Angeles, Silver Line in Boston and Lymmo in Orlando, Fla., and designs in which the buses look like light-rail vehicles.

"The transit services are doing back flips to give their systems a brand and an image," Hess said.

Planners also emphasize how much BRT is like light rail or a modern subway, with its high-tech stations, limited stops, fast boarding and electronic fare payments.

"From the public perspective, buses are not attractive," Hess said. "Who wants to be seen standing at the edge of the road, waiting for the bus?"

But BRT stops have snazzy shelters and other amenities that make them stand out, Hinebaugh said. They often have security cameras, a telephone with a direct line to travel information and, at the high end, a rail-like station. In some areas, such as along Boston's Silver Line, these stops have sparked transit-oriented development.

The locations of stops and stations in Rockland and Westchester have yet to be worked out by the Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 environmental review team. So far, team leader Michael Anderson said he envisioned that, in Westchester, buses would travel in dedicated lanes along Route 119 and Westchester Avenue, but routes that bypassed White Plains would ride in mixed traffic on I-287.

In some cities, BRT buses provide free center-city service and serve as circulator buses for shoppers during lunch hours. Routes and stops through White Plains have not been developed.

In Rockland, they would travel in a dedicated lane along I-287 but would leave the highway to stop in Suffern.

BRT is just one option, though, and if it were chosen, it could be used alone or in combination with commuter rail.

There could be BRT across the entire corridor, or train stations with park-and-ride lots could be built across Rockland.

Manhattan-bound riders from Rockland and Orange counties could board Metro-North Railroad trains and ride across a new bridge, onto the Hudson Line and into Manhattan. Westchester- or Connecticut-bound commuters could either leave the train at a new station in Tarrytown and board BRT buses to reach their destination, or, with corridor-wide BRT, they could park at a lot near their closest exit on I-287 and then board the bus.

Experts say any time a transfer is required, ridership drops.

"The more you make people switch, the more you're going to lose riders, and the more you're going to defeat the purpose of having mass transit," said Jonathan Orcutt, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a transit advocacy group.

The New York City group favors BRT because of its flexibility, and Orcutt said "smart" service plans could be designed to circulate BRT buses through Westchester corporate parks. Tri-State said the best combination would be full-corridor BRT with commuter rail from Rockland to Tarrytown, but that's not

among the six options.

"It's always better to have one ride from start to finish," Hinebaugh said. "It certainly works throughout the country, throughout the world, especially if it's one mode. Changing from outside to inside or upstairs to downstairs wouldn't be a fatal flaw, but it's not a good thing."

Whatever ultimately is built would cost billions and have to compete both within the region and the nation for federal funding.

From that perspective, Bus Rapid Transit has an advantage: It costs a lot less. Full-corridor BRT would cost half the price of full-corridor commuter rail, \$6.5 billion vs. \$14.5 billion. Commuter rail through Rockland and BRT across Westchester comes in at \$11.5 billion.

In Los Angeles, MetroRapid BRT cost \$250,000 a mile for buses that traveled in mixed traffic and used signal priority, resulting in a 33 percent decrease in travel time, Hinebaugh said. But L.A.'s Orange Line, which is treated like a rail line, cost \$23 million a mile.

"That shows you the range of BRT," Hinebaugh said.

Once people realize they can spend a fraction of the cost for a service with comparable travel time, Hess said, public consensus often shifts to BRT.

"If the community is able to spend less by building BRT, then they have money to spend on other needs," he said.

Any decision about whether BRT or commuter rail would best serve the I-287 corridor is premature, said Patrick Gerdin, Rockland County's principal transportation planner and a member of the Westchester Rockland Tappan Zee Futures Task Force.

"We're waiting," Gerdin said, "to see some real information about how these modes will work."
