Bus Rapid Transit Forum
May 11, 2006
Willard Middle School

Willard Neighborhood Association hosted an educational forum on the proposal by AC Transit to implement Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) from downtown San Leandro to downtown Oakland and on to downtown Berkeley. In Berkeley, much of the route will be on Telegraph Ave. and will directly impact the Willard, Le Conte, Halcyon, and Bateman neighborhoods. The intent, and execution, was to provide a non-advocacy forum where questions about BRT could be raised in a civil exchange of ideas. More than 90 people from Berkeley and Oakland attended this forum.

AC Transit Senior Transportation Planner and BRT point person, Jim Cunradi, presented a general overview of what BRT will mean to the Telegraph Ave. corridor. He said that he was unable to discuss details of the plan until the draft EIR was approved in Washington, DC. That plan is expected to be out later this year.

He opened the presentation with an overview of BRT as its been adopted in other cities around the world such as Curitiba, Brazil and Vancouver, Canada. The key to understanding BRT is that it reduces the amount of time BRT bus is stopped, whether at intersections or due to passenger boarding and fare collection. It accomplishes this by using dedicated bus lanes, increasing the distance between stops, having traffic signal priority, having raised platforms to make access/egress to the buses easier and using advanced fare collection systems. He hopes to see 10 minutes cut from the transit time from UC to downtown Oakland.

The dedicated lane feature will mean that Telegraph Ave. from downtown Oakland to Dwight Way will be reduced to one lane of auto traffic in each direction. In addition, in order to reduce auto/bus accidents, left turns off Telegraph Ave. will be limited to only major intersections with traffic lights. To cross Telegraph Ave. at other locations, autos would probably need to detour into the surrounding neighborhoods and cross Telegraph Ave. at the next intersection.

The traffic signal priority system will allow the BRT buses to hold a traffic light on green so that it can pass through, or to shave a few seconds off the red light time so that it can proceed more quickly. AC Transit will pay for the interconnection of all traffic lights on Telegraph Ave. so that they can be timed to speed the flow of traffic in general and the BRT buses in particular.

The timed light feature will be in effect by late Summer of 2006, when AC Transit will implement the Rapid Bus phase of the project. Rapid Bus will implement many of the features of BRT with the primary exception of the installation of bus only traffic lanes. This is the same system that has been implemented on San Pablo Ave. and has seen a marked increase in Rapid Bus ridership and has reduced ridership attrition on the San Pablo Ave. corridor when compared to AC Transit as a whole this past year.

These are projected benefits for BRT

- Greatly increases corridor transit ridership
- Reduces out trips
- Improves air quality
- Reduces energy use
- Increases operating efficiency of AC Transit
- Supports transit oriented development
- Improves conditions for pedestrian and bicyclists

These are the projected impacts of BRT

- Auto congestion at some intersections
- Auto congestion in neighboring residential and commercial areas
- Displacement of parking near BRT stations
- Left turn restrictions at minor streets
- Mitigation plan to be devised

Time Line for implementation

- Summer 2006 – Open Rapid Bus line
- Summer/Fall 2006 – Release draft Environmental Impact Statement
- Fall 2006 – Public Hearings, public and agency comments, neighborhood workshops
- Fall 2007 – Locally preferred alternative selected
- Fall 2007 – Final EIS/EIR released / final mitigation program released
- Spring/summer 2008 – Release bids, begin construction
- Summer/Fall 2008 – Start service

Past-Mayor, Shirley Dean, gave a short presentation on the history of BRT. A mass-transit project was originally proposed when Dean was Mayor and scoping sessions were held by City of Berkeley Commissions and in some neighborhood meetings. BRT was one of the alternatives developed in those scoping sessions. She then described the Environmental Impact Statement process and the time line for the different actions to take place. The one that offers significant input from the neighborhoods is the public comment period on the draft EIS. That will be a 45-day process and will include public meetings where questions may be raised and an opportunity for more detailed written statements to be submitted.

Following that presentation, Marie Bowman, president of the Berkeley Alliance of Neighborhood Associations, gave a few practical tips on how to advocate either pro or con using the draft EIS as a tool. She handed out the names and addresses for the many different local, state and federal government agencies and elected officials who can weigh in on the BRT proposal. Those names are available in a separate document. She presented a list of issues that would likely be discussed in the EIS and that were of particular interest to the affected communities.

- Parking
- Traffic
- Emergency Road access
- Air Quality
- Energy Use
- Water Quality
- Urban Design/Planning
- Accessibility

There was an extended Question and Answer period where both written and oral questions were put to the three panelists. The vast bulk of the questions were directed at Mr. Cunradi, although several of the questions were directed at Mayor Dean and Ms. Bowman.

One question that baffled all of the panelists and others in the audience, was who had ultimate control of the streets in a city. This came up in the context of what would happen if Berkeley decided not to take part in BRT and whether AC Transit had the right to condemn the right of way by eminent domain.

Cunradi noted that emergency vehicles, including police, fire and ambulance would be able to access the bus only lanes. They will also be equipped with traffic signal priority devices. Finally they will not be subject to the turn restrictions autos must abide by.

A number of people asked about the environmental effects of the plan including the choice of diesel buses rather than electric buses. Mr., Cunradi spoke of proposals to add alternative fuel vehicles to the AC Transit fleet and also noted that the Bus Only lanes could be converted to light rail line in the future

The question of what would happen to the BRT line from Dwight Way to UC was not answered as there are several routing options being proposed and they will be discussed more fully in the EIS.

Some people were concerned about the lack of protection at night on a transit mall next to UC if that were the preferred alternative for that section of Telegraph. Others thought that the transit mall might offer a useful tool in the rejuvenation of the distressed area.

Another question dealing with the larger issue of transportation planning in the Southside area was not addressed since it required expertise from the City's Planning or Traffic Engineering Departments and no one from those departments was in attendance at the meeting.

A number of questions were not addressed due to time constraints. Those questions have been compiled and sent to Jim Cunradi,. Answers to those questions, a copy of Mr. Cunradi's and Ms. Bowman's presentations, as well as other documentation will be available on the Kitchen Democracy website (KitchenDemocracy.org).

In attendance at the WNA Educational Forum from City Hall, was District 7 Councilmember Kriss Worthington. Mayor Bates sent his Asst. for Transportation Calvin Fong, District 8 Councilmember Gordon Wozniak was out of town and sent his regrets. Peter Hillier of the City Manager's office had a conflict come up, so he could not attend, and despite multiple requests from the WNA, no other City officials were in attendance.

For those wishing to hear the AC Transit proposal in person and to ask questions about the impact of the BRT line on your neighborhood, AC Transit is holding five open houses.

- Wed. May 28 6:30pm San Leandro City Hall
- Mon. June 2 6:30pm East Oakland Allen Temple
- Wed. June 4 6:30pm N. Berkeley Sr. Center
- Thurs. June 5 3:30pm Oakland City Hall Hearing Rm. 3
- Thurs. June 5 6:30pm Oakland City Hall Hearing Rm. 3