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CTA awaits word on federal funds for faster bus system

\$150 million from feds would help fund bus rapid transit

Jon Hilkevitch | Getting Around
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Traffic moves on 79th St. looking east from Sangamon St., Friday April 30, 2010. (Abel Uribe/ Chicago Tribune)

Officials at the **Chicago Transit Authority** are hopeful that the **Federal Transit Administration** believes in second chances.

After winning, then losing, federal funding a couple of years ago, the **CTA** is again competing for a \$150 million grant to introduce rapid-transit-style bus service in Chicago.

The system would begin operating on 50 miles of arterial streets and eventually expand citywide to connect with dozens of other bus routes as well as CTA and **Metra** rail lines.

The CTA and city transportation officials envision bus rapid transit as a tool to transform Chicago's transit grid and spark a long-term surge of new riders who enjoy the advantages of

being whisked ahead of traffic on bus-only lanes.

In addition to the potential congestion-relief benefits in the nation's second most traffic-clogged city, air quality would be improved by luring many drivers out of their cars and onto buses, officials said. It all can be accomplished at a fraction of the cost of building new rail lines, and in much less time, they added.

The CTA applied for funding over the winter and the Federal Transit Administration plans to award money this spring to at least one bus rapid transit project that is ready to get under way soon, FTA officials said last week.

CTA officials have set a launch date of early 2012, assuming their application for \$150 million is approved.

The first four corridors of a planned 20-corridor bus rapid transit network are on **79th Street** from **Ford City to South Shore Drive**; **Chicago Avenue** from **Austin Boulevard to Navy Pier**; **Halsted Street** from **Waveland Avenue/Broadway to 79th Street**; and **Jeffery Boulevard** from **103rd Street/Stony Island to Jefferson/Washington Streets**.

The CTA effort comes after a first attempt that was successful in winning a \$153 million federal grant in 2008 from the Bush administration. But the grant for the pilot project was rescinded when City Hall missed a deadline to raise downtown parking meter rates as part of a "congestion-pricing" strategy to discourage driving into the crowded central business district during peak hours.

Meter rates eventually soared, without the benefit of offering bus rapid transit as an alternative, under a still-controversial deal in which the Daley administration privatized street parking.

The new grant program does not include a congestion-pricing requirement. But it does mandate that applicants meet "livability principles" that include showing how the new bus service would impact areas of the city that are currently underserved by transit; major employment centers and high-density residential areas; as well as helping to reduce pollution.

This time around, a total of \$193.4 million, including \$43.6 million in state and local matches, is needed to acquire 131 accordion-style buses; establish dedicated bus-only lanes during rush periods; install traffic signals that give buses priority to proceed through intersections ahead of other vehicles; and construct special bus stations where passengers will prepay their fares, as they do on the CTA rail system.

"If funding is secured for bus rapid transit, it would allow us to speed travel for riders," said CTA President Richard Rodriguez.

Average bus speeds would increase by as much as 48 percent over buses operating in traffic on regular routes, according to the application Chicago submitted to the Federal Transit Administration.

Bus rapid-transit systems, which are operating in cities ranging from **Cleveland to Curitiba, Brazil**, go far beyond the service provided by existing CTA express bus routes.

The rapid-transit buses would make limited stops, at intervals of a half mile to a mile. Passengers board through the front and back doors of buses after paying their fares at bus rapid-transit kiosks at the stations.

Travel times would be slashed compared to normal bus routes. The 50.4-mile startup network would include 17.1 miles of dedicated lanes that would be open exclusively to buses during rush hours, then revert back to use by all vehicles in off-peak hours.

"Dedicated lanes for bus service during rush periods would help to move people faster through the system when it is most critical — mornings and evenings, when the largest number of people are headed either to or from work," Rodriguez said.

While federal officials have not tipped their hand about the CTA's chances of recapturing the lost grant, local urban planning officials are optimistic, saying the transit agency submitted a competitive bid.

"I think the CTA has a pretty good chance of receiving federal funding because bus rapid transit makes a lot of sense for the city and suburban areas," said Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the **Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning**.

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"People want to get from place to place as efficiently and conveniently as possible," he said, "and bus rapid transit fits the bill at a much lower cost than building fixed rail systems."

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