

Bus Rapid Transit Leads to Jobs

By County Executive Scott Walker

The wave of the future is Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). It is a cost effective way to provide service similar to a rail-based system while still providing the flexibility of a traditional bus system. Through the use of designated lanes, off-site ticketing, controlled intersections and other enhancements – and the use of energy efficient, hybrid buses – BRT decreases travel times by some XX% and increases ridership on the system by XX%.

Economic development is also a benefit. According to the American Public Transportation Association, some 20 BRT projects are underway or in operation across the country - from Eugene, Oregon, to Miami, Florida, from Boston to Los Angeles - leading to increased land values, rising property valuations and revenue streams.

In the 13 years after Pittsburgh's Martin Luther King Jr. East Busway opened, 54 development projects totaling \$302 million had taken place nearby. Related new development, still continuing, is now valued at over \$500 million.

Here in Milwaukee County, the 2009 budget includes support for an application to the federal government for a BRT line from the northwest down Fond du Lac Avenue to downtown Milwaukee and then southwest along National Avenue to West Allis. We are working with the Federal Transit Administration on this new route that would serve one of the busiest areas in the county.

Now, with the \$XX.X remaining from the \$91.5 million in federal funding, we will move forward on an East/West line from the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center and Milwaukee County Research Park grounds along Wisconsin Avenue to downtown Milwaukee and up to the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

This will be an impressive route that can connect people to jobs and to places of higher learning (to prepare for jobs).

Our plan to move forward on BRT is good news. Still, it is unfortunate that it moves forward only because the Congress intervened and gave the City of Milwaukee 60% of the funds that were to be used for mass transit in the region.

Without new transit aid from the state government, the streetcar system envisioned by the Mayor of Milwaukee will cost the local bus system up to \$3 million annually. It is unfortunate that the full amount could not have been used to create a system that really serves transit-dependent people.

Instead, \$XX.X will be used for a streetcar system that serves a 3-mile loop in downtown Milwaukee. The cost is likely higher as the city recently submitted a "stimulus" request of \$100 million for the streetcar line.

In the end, taxpayers in the City of Milwaukee will be asked to pay higher taxes to cover the remaining \$XX.X cost of building the system. Then, they will be asked to pay higher taxes to pay for the operations of the system.

With the new streetcars, Milwaukee taxpayers will be asked to pay twice for mass transit – once for the city streetcar system and once for the county bus system. This is one of the many reasons why we preferred that all of the \$91.5 million of remaining federal funds go to improve and upgrade the bus system.

Still, we are ready to go with the resources we do have from the current county budget and from the federal government. A new Bus Rapid Transit system will:

- Improve travel times along the bus system,
- Connect more people to jobs, and
- Enable new levels of economic development throughout the county.

And all of these improvements can be done without raising our taxes. BRT is the wave of the future and we are ready to move forward.