

AUSTIN

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# BENDY BUS

INSIDE!

**METRORAPID HAS ARRIVED**

BY RICHARD WHITTAKER **20**

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# Here Comes MetroRapid

Cap Metro rolls out its big bendy buses, the next mode in multimodal

BY RICHARD WHITTAKER



through a BRT rollout before, having lived in Santa Monica, Calif., when the city's Big Blue Bus agency introduced its BRT system. He said, "It's not something you can expect to put on the street and expect 50,000 new riders on Friday. But what I personally have seen is that when that vehicle is passing you by in the transit lane when you're in your car, you're going to say, 'Why aren't I in there?'"

## False Economies?

The signs of the city's growth are obvious. Speaking from his Downtown office, city of Austin Director of Transportation Rob Spillar said, "I count 14 tower cranes visible from my window right now. That's another 40,000 or 60,000 residents and employees headed to Austin right now." Spillar called that growth a good problem to have, since it's an indicator of the city's economic health. "You don't hear Detroit complaining about congestion, or Chicago," he said. But there's congestion, and then there's congestion – and Austin is running out of road space now. Spillar added, "All our gateways into Central Austin are full, so BRT allows us to increase the carrying capacity of the roads we have right now."

Chris Riley is watching the introduction from two different perspectives: first, as a Council member, and secondly, as a member of the Cap Metro board. He said, "From the Cap Metro perspective, it's a considerable step forward in terms of the effort to enhance our bus services. From the city perspective, it's particularly exciting to see transit come into its own, particularly in the urban core." Yet both Spillar and Riley are realistic that drivers will need more incentive to ride than the existing system may provide. With such amenities as wi-fi commonplace in other cities, Riley said, "Passengers have raised expectations around the world in regard to transit."

But with the introduction of express routes, there's an inevitable trade-off. The 801 will effectively replace two current services: the express 101, and the local 1L. For most of its route, the 1L stops at every other block; 801 stations can be more than a mile apart. While the other local route along the corridor – the 1M, soon to be renumbered the 1 – will still use all the same stops as before, there'll be a drop in overall frequency. Currently, at rush hour there's supposed to be a 1L or a 1M at those stops every 10 to 12 minutes. Under the new schedule, that will drop to once every 22 minutes or so. Cap Metro's thinking is that, in addition to new commuters lured out of their cars, there will be some regulars from the 101 or 1L on the 801.

But Mike Dahmus, a former member of the city's Urban Transportation Commission, is concerned that the agency is cannibalizing those existing routes. Dahmus is a persistent thorn in Cap Metro's side (his Twitter feed and blog – "M1EK's Bake-Sale of Bile" – are filled regularly with anti-agency postings). For him, it's not just about the speed – although, as he points out, current calculations show the 801 will be no faster than the 101 – but about the impact of removing one of the local lines. It's simple math: Cap Metro

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"If you give people good coffee and good tunes, they will park and ride." In 1992's ode to progressive Seattle, *Singles*, that's how transportation planner Steve Dunne sells the idea of commuter rail. Replace coffee with comfy seats, and tunes with free wi-fi, and that's how Capital Metro hopes to sell its newest development, MetroRapid buses, to Austin's ever-growing business commuter community.

This Sunday, Jan. 26, Cap Metro will launch its first MetroRapid service: the 801, an express route from Tech Ridge to Southpark Meadows, linking Lamar, Guadalupe, and South Congress. It's one more component of Project Connect, the joint initiative between the city of Austin and Cap Metro to construct a genuine rapid mass transit system involving express buses, and light and commuter rail. The plan is to create a fast, clean, modern alternative for commuters – and in the process take some of the increasing strain off Austin's overburdened roads. As the first local example of bus rapid transit (BRT), Cap Metro president and CEO Linda Watson called MetroRapid "somewhere between bus and rail. ... It's smart buses, operating on smart streets, stopping at smart stations."

The plan is to get 21,000 boardings a day on MetroRapid within the first 24 months. It should be easy for those passengers to spot the new service. At 60 feet, the vehicles (transit staff try to avoid the word "buses" for them) are half again as long as the normal Cap Metro rolling stock. The other clue is that these are "articulated" buses; they look like two buses glued together, with an accordion in between. That means the back

and front move independently, earning the nicknames "bendy buses," "caterpillar buses," and "Slinky buses."

A common sight in many American cities, including Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago, and Houston, they look cumbersome, but in the hands of an experienced driver they actually handle a little more easily than the regular 40-footers. Inside, the vehicles don't look like the aging and crowded units they're replacing; they're airy and spacious, with taller ceilings, higher windows, more seat padding than regular buses, plus free wi-fi. There are also wider-than-standard doors, and more of them. Unlike regular Cap Metro buses, where passengers can only embark at the front, passengers will be able to get on and off through any door. That's an important part of their design: With three doors, plus card readers and mobile phone scanners at the two rear doors, a MetroRapid bus can load and unload more quickly.

and Lavaca, and MetroRapid vehicles will communicate with lights at crossings to keep them green longer for bus passage. Combine everything, and Cap Metro hopes that a host of non-traditional bus riders will be coaxed to park and ride. Watson said, "Everything is geared to be rapid."

The 801 is just stage one of the planned MetroRapid rollout. A second route, the 803, will launch later this summer, connecting the Domain to Westgate via Burnet Road and South Lamar – and if those two routes are successful, then Cap Metro could consider more later. That success could depend heavily on UT riders – after all, both routes go through the Forty Acres, and the 803 will provide a faster connection to the Pickle Research Campus. According to Dottie Watkins, vice president of Bus & Paratransit Services, UT is "very excited about what the 803 can mean for that campus. ... They have a lot of opportunity to expand up there, they do a ton of research up there, and there's a lot of folks who've moved up there."

**On Jan. 26, Cap Metro will launch its first MetroRapid service: the 801, an express route from Tech Ridge to Southpark Meadows, linking Lamar, Guadalupe, and South Congress.**

## First of Many

That's half of the equation. The other half is the stops – or, in MetroRapid lingo, "stations." Spacious, shaded, off the sidewalk, and with digital displays giving real-time arrival information, they're located at the biggest apartment complexes, or the biggest firms and office complexes. There will also be bus "priority lanes" on Guadalupe

MetroRapid arrives while Austin's ever-expanding population – an estimated 100 new residents and 70 additional cars every day – puts greater pressure than ever on the road system. If MetroRapid is successful, it could slow, mitigate, or even reverse the impact of some of those white-collar commuters. Dan Dawson, Cap Metro's vice president of marketing and communications, has been

## METRORAPID 101: WHAT'S A BENDY BUS?

**So what's the deal with those weird accordion buses?** That's a MetroRapid bus, part of the new bus rapid transit (BRT) system. Capital Metro won a \$38 million federal grant in 2012, and some of that has gone to buy 22 of these 60-foot buses. They're able to carry more passengers than the regular 40-foot buses: 101, rather than 78.

**Why do they have that funny bendy straw bit in the middle?** So they can turn corners more easily.

**Where will they be going?** There's a new route – the 801 North Lamar/South Congress – running from Tech Ridge, down Lamar/Guadalupe to Downtown, then over the river, along Riverside to Congress, and then down Congress to Southpark Meadows. The plan is that, with fewer stops and more seats, they'll be faster than the regular bus service.

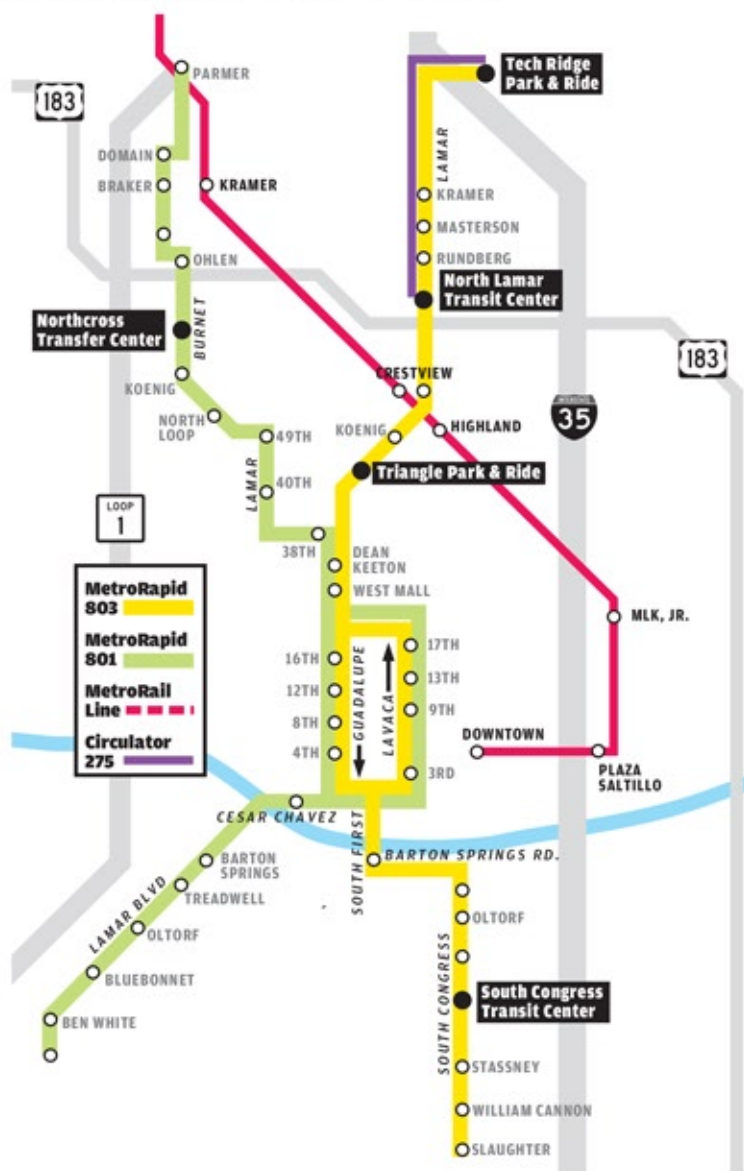
**How often will they run?** Weekdays, every 12 to 20 minutes, rising to every 10 minutes during rush hour. Over the weekend that'll go down to every 20 to 30 minutes. The really good news is that Cap Metro is finally starting to extend its hours a little bit: The 801 will run weekdays from 5am-1am, Saturdays 6am-12mid, Sundays 7am-11pm.

**Will all the old routes still be there?** No. The 801 replaces the 1L North Lamar/South Congress (via Lamar) and the 101 North Lamar/South Congress Limited. The 1M North Lamar/South Congress (via Metric) remains, but will be renumbered as the 1 South Congress/Metric.

**Won't they still just get stuck in Austin's traffic?** They're buses, not helicopters. However, they will be able to communicate with the traffic lights at intersections, getting them to stay green for a few seconds longer to allow them to pass. There will also be designated bus lanes Downtown.

**How much is it?** Because it's effectively an express service, MetroRapid will fall in Cap Metro's new "premium" category, along with all of the limited and flyer routes, such as the 100 MetroAirport Flyer and the 135 Dell Limited. A single ticket will be \$1.50; \$3 for a 24-hour pass; \$13.50 for a seven-day pass; and \$49.50 for a full 31 days.

**Why so expensive?** Considering that a day pass is \$3 in Houston and \$5 in Dallas, it's actually pretty competitive. Still, it's more expensive than the regular buses – they're only a buck: This is a commuter service, which is why there will be wi-fi. Travelers will also be able to use mobile ticketing, instead of lining up at the grocery store to buy monthly passes.



**but I don't want to take the 801: How will I get to Tech Ridge?** There'll be a new circulator route, the 275 North Lamar, running from North Lamar Transit Center to Howard Lane.

**Will there be more MetroRapid?** Yes. Cap Metro plans to introduce the 803 Burnet/South Lamar late this summer. This will replace another very popular route, the 3. However, unlike the 801, which will still have the 1 to provide regular service, the 803 will completely replace the current route. Also, they won't be using the bendy buses: They'll be the regular 40-foot length, not the flexible 60-footers, just with all the mod cons.

– R.W.

**Sounds fancy:** It's supposed to. The 1L is one of the most used routes in Cap Metro's system, but it's often overcrowded and dirty. The reduced number of stops and higher prices, plus all the extras, is Cap Metro's way of attracting more business commuters.

**Is this why I'm seeing these new fancy stops around town?** Those aren't "stops": In official BRT lingo, they're "stations." They'll have real-time bus tracking and display screens, which Cap Metro promises will mean arrival times updated every 90 seconds.

**But aren't there fewer of those stations than there are the old stops?** That's one of the big points of controversy. In the urban core, there's a stop every two to three blocks; the MetroRapid stations can be up to a mile apart.

**So what does that mean for urban-core users?** Currently, there's either a 1L or a 1M every 13 minutes during the daytime. The 1 will still use regular stops, but will only run only once every 26 to 60 minutes, while the 801 uses only the new stations.

**Will any other routes be affected?** Yes. Downtown, three routes will be moved. The 7 Duval/Dove Springs and 20 Manor/Riverside will move from Congress to Guadalupe/Lavaca. The 17 Cesar Chavez, which currently loops around Brazos and Congress between Cesar Chavez and 11th, will go up Red River, along Eighth, down Guadalupe and San Antonio, and across Cesar Chavez.

**I used to take the 1L to work,**

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has been installing 43 new dedicated MetroRapid "stations" for the 801 (with an additional 34 for the 803), and that's dramatically fewer than the 239 "stops" for the 1L. If you're waiting at one of the fancy new stations, he said, "You're not losing any buses but you're not getting any more buses. If you're at a stop that is only served by locals, you're losing half your buses."

In part, his frustration comes because the 1L/1M is the most heavily used part of the entire Cap Metro system, with the greatest number of passes sold, and therefore the least dependent on the 1% sales tax that subsidizes Cap Metro operations. Dahmus said, "The question is, why are we making service worse for people who are coming closest to paying their way?" He fears that Cap Metro is sacrificing an existing busy local service to make the express service more viable. "They want the bus with the higher fares to be more full than it would be if the 1L was still running."

Watkins puts the agency's response bluntly: "Because funds are not unlimited." While non-express riders will still have the renumbered 1M, it's simply not economically viable to keep the 1L and lay the 801 over its service map. She said, "We would love to be able have more frequent service, even on some of our core local routes, but as all agencies do, we struggle with what's the best use of our limited resources."

Yet if the loss of local service along the 801 is a concern, then the 803's late-summer rollout could be a real headache. Initially, Cap Metro planned that the 803 replace the



Cap Metro president and CEO Linda Watson defines MetroRapid as "somewhere between bus and rail."

JOHN ANDERSON

only local service along that route, the 3 Burnet/Manchaca. However, the agency has pumped the brakes on that idea, and its planning department is considering options for a local route. For Dahmus, that's less of an immediate problem than the removal of the 1L. "Unlike the change in the 801, the 803 is an increase in capacity," he said. "You can say it's more frequent and you don't have to have your fingers crossed. You can say it's faster, and you don't have to have your fingers crossed." However, Burnet Road is one of the fastest developing areas of town, with several apartment complexes

either being built or in the planning stage. Dahmus said, "If you look at Burnet 10 years forward, you could look at an unbroke string of three- to four-story buildings with no stops."

## The Railing Over Rail

And then there's rail. Dahmus is one of a vocal number of transit advocates who want the city's proposed urban rail to run up Guadalupe and Lamar, rather than the currently favored Red River route, and MetroRapid blocks that plan, at least temporarily. Watson's counter-argument is simple:

MetroRapid doesn't rule out rail on Guadalupe and Lamar for all time. Moreover, Austinites probably wouldn't be having this argument if voters had approved the last proposal for commuter rail up Lamar/ Guadalupe in 2000. But they didn't, and so MetroRapid is the closest thing to rail the city can get on that artery without a massive injection of voter-approved cash. MetroRapid was in part a response to that bond failure; when Cap Metro started planning the routes in 2009, they say, there was no timeline for another rail bond.

There is also no guarantee that voters will back this year's bond. Moreover, since the feds have sunk \$38 million into financing the BRT project, they're highly unlikely to back an alternative until they've got their money's worth.

Whatever happens, Council Member Riley sees MetroRapid as an inevitable next step in Austin's transportation evolution — which may not always be painless. He said, "We've talked for many years about being a multimodal city, but obviously cars are the dominant form of commuting, and we've seen that's gotten increasingly problematic." While some drivers may shift their commute over to transit, others may fume about the dedicated bus lanes and the resultant loss of parking. However, Riley described the dedicated lanes as "the first step in giving transit the priority it deserves."

For the moment, Cap Metro is most concerned about a smooth rollout. The city's Public Works Department has promised that it will have its long-running Eighth Street renovations far enough along that that at least the priority bus lanes on Guadalupe and Lavaca will be in place before the 801 starts running. After that, Watson promises, there will be "close monitoring" of how many riders are getting on and off, and the tougher calculation of how many riders have been lost. Long term, that could mean further route adjustments or additional stops.

Riley summarized, "It's a balance and I'm not going to tell you that we've definitely hit the balance right. We'll probably have to make adjustments." In the meantime, as Austin's commuters adapt to and hopefully adopt the new service, he cited what one mass transit expert told him: "His main advice was to remember that this is a work in progress. This won't be a panacea from day one." ■

## WHAT IS 'BUS RAPID TRANSIT'?

Capital Metro calls the new MetroRapid service a bus rapid transit system (BRT), but that term is about more than just fast buses. In fact, there's no international or even national consensus on exactly what is and isn't BRT, nor are all BRT systems created equal: The Institute for Transportation & Development Policy grades systems according to its BRT standard from "Gold" to "Bronze." Here's how the Federal Transit Authority defines BRT, and how MetroRapid measures up:

**Improved Vehicle Design:** MetroRapid vehicles are more spacious than traditional buses, while the 330-horsepower engines are surprisingly quiet. They're also wi-fi equipped.

**Reduced Fare Collection Time:** MetroRapid accommodates mobile ticketing, and allows card swipe and mobile passes to be used at all three doors.

**Improved and Distinctive Stops and Shelters:** MetroRapid features new stations, many standing clear of the sidewalk, reducing any holdups for other road users and pedestrians. Also, some will have raised platforms for easier loading and unloading.

**Dedicated Bus Lanes, Busways or Expressways:** Initially there will be express bus-only lanes on the Guadalupe/Lavaca corridor, but these may be extended, and future routes could use the high occupancy vehicle lanes on MoPac.

**Signal Priority:** MetroRapid vehicles communicate with traffic lights, keeping them green slightly longer without overly impacting other traffic.

**Automatic Vehicle Location:** MetroRapid vehicles use cell-phone systems to send real-time arrival information to station displays.

**Land Use:** The FTA proposes that BRT be sited to both serve high-demand populations, such as apartment complexes and big employers (which MetroRapid backers argue it does), and to encourage desirable transit-oriented development over time. — R.W.

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