

## **Life in the fast lane: CTA eyes Cleveland's buses Chicago set to test its own express lanes, which are cheaper than rail projects**

By Jon Hilkevitch | Chicago Tribune reporter

### **Cleveland's bus plan may be Chicago's plan**

*Photo caption:* Skateboarder Kevin Rouse passes one of the new hybrid diesel buses on Cleveland's Health Line. Bus-only lanes there will stretch more than 9 miles. (Tribune photo by Kuni Takahashi / July 9, 2008)

CLEVELAND - Don't dare dismiss the new \$200 million transit service starting up here as just another bus line. Officials certainly aren't at the Chicago Transit Authority, which is studying Cleveland's experiment before launching its own "bus rapid transit" here in about a year.

Extra-long, hybrid diesel buses featuring stylized touches that resemble sleek high-speed trains pull up to platforms at shiny steel-and-glass stations in the median of a major Cleveland thoroughfare.

The street has undergone a remake, including bus-only lanes and new traffic-signal technology that will give buses the green light for almost 10 miles from downtown to the city's east side.

The transit corridor, called the Health Line, is geared toward attracting professionals, many of them doctors and other health-care workers who commute to a medical district anchored by the renowned Cleveland Clinic. Medical companies are paying the city's transit authority \$12 million for the naming rights.

The challenge facing Cleveland-and ultimately Chicago-is how to set the new service apart from the stereotype of bus travel as slow, outdated and used mostly by society's have-nots.

"In Cleveland, suits don't ride buses. We are out to change that," Joseph Calabrese, chief executive officer and general manager of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transportation Authority, said last week as he rode on one of the buses with a Tribune reporter.

The bus-only lanes are still under construction along Cleveland's Euclid Avenue but are scheduled to be completed along a 9.4-mile stretch of the road by late October. The 4-mile section already in operation has drawn commuters from cars by providing a first-class travel experience that trims trip times and eliminates gas and parking expenses, officials said.

The buses pass cars in adjacent lanes where the speed limit is lower and traffic is thicker. The cost to ride the Health Line: \$1.75, the same as the regular transit fare.

"I can't wait for the full service to get here," said DeAnna Poindexter, 32, who works in management technology. "The car drivers are so inconsiderate talking on their cell phones while they block the buses."

At the CTA, whose buses average a snail-like 9 m.p.h., bus rapid transit has been earmarked as the No. 1 near-term priority. Armed with a \$153 million federal grant, the CTA plans to test bus-only lanes on four Chicago routes- portions of Chicago Avenue, Halsted Street, 79<sup>th</sup> Street and Jeffery Boulevard- starting mid-year 2009. The project would start with about 10 miles of bus-only lanes and eventually expand to more than 100 miles.

As in Cleveland, CTA riders will see upgraded vehicles, specialized stations and corporate sponsorships. CTA buses will also be equipped with transponders so buses can breeze through intersections on green lights. And much like

Cleveland, bus stops will be spaced farther apart-about a quarter-mile-to help cut travel times.

The key difference from Cleveland, though, will be the CTA bus-only lanes will operate only during the rush hours-one lane inbound in the morning and one lane outbound in the evening on each of the four routes. Off-peak, the lanes will be open to all traffic.

On most of Cleveland's Health Line corridor, one lane in each direction is dedicated to only buses 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That makes more sense in Cleveland because its congestion isn't as bad as in Chicago, which ranks No. 2 in the nation for traffic gridlock. It also helps that two major streets that parallel Euclid Avenue can handle additional car traffic, officials said.

When a Cleveland rapid transit vehicle stops at a median station, a large door opens on its left side and passengers stream aboard without having to climb any stairs, making it wheelchair accessible. When construction is completed, riders will pre-pay their fares at the stations to avoid delays, a strategy that the CTA plans as well. The wider bus interior gives it an airy feel, and the seats are deluxe by transit standards.

Traffic signals at intersections will be automatically programmed to extend the green light so buses can travel at a consistent 35 m.p.h. in the bus-only congestion-free lanes. The 25 m.p.h. speed limit for cars in adjacent lanes is designed to encourage drivers to use alternate streets.

When the construction is completed, travel times are projected to decline by more than 25 percent over existing bus service, Cleveland officials said.

In Chicago, CTA officials are even more hopeful, projecting that travel times on the bus-only lanes could be cut in half when bus rapid transit reaches full speed by 2010.

In addition to its transportation benefits, the Health Line is extending an economic lifeline to neighborhoods on the route that have been in need of resuscitation for many years. The city has lost almost half of its population of 1 million-plus when it was a bustling manufacturing center during the first half of the 20th Century.

Young professionals and empty-nesters are slowly returning to the city center and to a blighted warehouse district, where restaurants, neighborhood bars, boutiques and other businesses are sprouting. "This is the next wave. There is housing and entertainment and a new demand for downtown living and economic integration," said Michael Taylor, president of the National City Community Development Corp., a bank that is supporting investment along the Health Line corridor.

A plan had been on the books for years in Cleveland to build a downtown subway, but efforts languished due to the project's estimated \$1 billion cost.

In the Chicago area, big-ticket rail projects-ranging from the CTA's proposed Circle Line stretching around the city to Metra's suburb-to-suburb STAR Line-would cost billions of dollars to build. Currently, no funding has been identified.

If Chicago's upcoming experiment pays off, it's possible that bus rapid transit networks, costing as little as one-fifth the price of heavy rail projects, would make a more viable alternative.

(source: Chicago Tribune July 2008)