

Light rail or bus rapid transit?

An overview of the similarities and differences between two high capacity transit modes

Why high capacity transit, why now?

Residents, employees, students and business owners in the Southwest Corridor need more safe and convenient choices for getting around. As more people and employers move to the area, connections to reliable transit service and other transportation choices will be vital to maintaining a high quality of life. One goal of the Southwest Corridor Plan is to identify a package of transportation solutions for the area, including a new high capacity transit connection that would provide a backbone of fast, reliable and accessible transit service through the corridor.

Which transit mode best meets the needs of your community?

Bus rapid transit and light rail can both provide great service to regional destinations and within communities. Yet there are trade-offs to each choice with regards to cost, capacity, impacts, ridership and many other factors. For example, although bus rapid transit is less expensive to construct than light rail, it can be more expensive to operate because bus rapid transit vehicles tend to be smaller and need to run more often in order to carry the same number of riders.

In December 2015, the Southwest Corridor Plan Steering Committee will decide whether light rail or bus rapid transit is the best choice for high capacity transit in the area. Leading up to the decision, project staff will study the trade-offs in further detail and gather feedback from the community.

Some basic information about how bus rapid transit and light rail compare is included on the other side of this sheet. More detailed information will be provided in October. Email us at swcorridorplan@oregonmetro.gov if there is anything in particular you would like to learn about the two modes to understand what's best for your community.

What is high capacity transit?

High capacity transit is public transit that often runs at least partially in its own right of way, separated from auto traffic, in order to provide fast and reliable service. Compared to local service transit such as standard buses, high capacity transit makes fewer stops, has faster boarding times, travels at higher speeds, has more substantial stations and carries more people.

For the Southwest Corridor, two kinds of high capacity transit are under consideration: light rail and bus rapid transit. While many people in the region have seen or ridden on TriMet's MAX light rail system, fewer have experience with bus rapid transit systems. Successful bus rapid transit systems are currently up and running in both Seattle and Eugene. Portland and Gresham-area planners are developing this region's first bus rapid transit system along the SE Powell-Division Corridor, expected to be in operation by 2020.



MAX light rail in Portland



EmX bus rapid transit in Eugene

Bus rapid transit, or BRT, can describe a broad range of transit types. To learn more about the various improvements that a bus rapid transit system can include, stay tuned for a future focus sheet that will explore bus rapid transit in more detail.

As part of the Southwest Corridor Plan’s goal to provide a package of transportation solutions for Tualatin, Tigard, SW Portland and the surrounding communities, project partners are evaluating bus rapid transit and light rail. Although these two types of high capacity transit would both provide a reliable transportation option for the area’s growing population and workforce, there are some important trade-offs to consider between the two modes.

The chart below provides a general overview of how light rail and bus rapid transit would compare in the Southwest Corridor. More detailed information, including estimates of construction and operating costs, ridership and travel time will be provided later this year.



MAX light rail in Portland




EmX bus rapid transit in Eugene


\$\$\$\$ Higher construction cost


\$\$ Lower construction cost


\$\$ Lower operating cost per passenger


\$\$\$\$ Higher operating cost per passenger


 266 passengers per vehicle

 86 passengers per vehicle

 100% in its own right-of-way

 50-80% in its own right-of-way

 Attracts more new transit riders

 Attracts fewer new transit riders

In December 2015, the steering committee will make the important choice between light rail and bus rapid transit for the Southwest Corridor. What else do you want to know about these transit choices? Let us know at swcorridorplan@oregonmetro.gov.