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Envisioning a Bus Lane Future for Los Angeles



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Issue

Bus riders in Los Angeles have experienced service cuts, a global pandemic, and a shortage of bus operators. Despite these challenges, bus ridership in Los Angeles remains high relative to other cities, showing its residents' reliance on the bus. Bus riders deserve better service, and transit agencies have been turning to the bus lane as a low-cost and reliable way to improve bus service. Bus lanes save travel time for riders by increasing the average speed of buses, while also making the bus more reliable through the alleviation of "bus bunching" — when congestion causes buses to arrive at unpredictable times. Improving reliability through bus lane implementation could potentially boost rider loyalty and further increase bus ridership.

The on-street bus lane prioritizes bus travel alongside normal traffic, which is distinct from the more expensive and infrastructure-reliant bus rapid transit (BRT). On-street bus lanes are the focus of this study as a more feasible goal for planners and advocates to consider.

This study envisions more bus lanes for Los Angeles and asks: What best practices can Los Angeles learn from the on-street bus lane implementations in other cities?

Study Approach

This study answered the research question through case studies of Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Sydney. These cities were selected based on characteristics of their bus lane programs and approximate similarities to Los Angeles in transit ridership characteristics (Figure 1). The researcher reviewed documents and interviewed transit advocates and agency staff in each case study city.

Key Findings

- Pilot project bus lanes, also known as tactical lanes, provide immediate low-cost benefits and the opportunity to collect public input from riders and motorists. Boston and Chicago used tactical lanes to garner public and political support for permanent bus lanes.
- Bus lane implementation can be a political battle and often hinges on the support of key political players and transit agencies. In Sydney, Transport for New South Wales prioritized buses by evaluating the performance of corridors in person throughput (the number of people who pass through) instead of vehicle throughput. Advocates in Chicago worked closely with then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot's office to turn the Chicago Avenue tactical lane into a permanent lane. Boston advocates intentionally engaged other New England

Figure 1. Characteristics of the case study cities and local context (Los Angeles)

	Boston	Seattle	Chicago	Sydney	Los Angeles
Greater Metro area (MSA) Population (2021)	4,899,932	4,011,553	9,509,934	5,231,147	9,811,842
Public Transit Mode Share	13.3%(2019)	10.7%(2019)	12.4% (2019)	22.8%(2016)	5.7%(2019)
Weekday Avg Bus Ridership (Oct 2019)	409,728 Weekday Trips	423,874 Weekday Boardings	801,026 Weekday Boardings	828,600 Daily Ridership	952,506 Weekday Ridership
On-Street Bus Lane Mileage	10	40	11	17	27

Sources: United States Census Bureau, 2021 (Tables B01003, B08141); Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, 2019; King County Metro, 2019; Chicago Transit Authority, 2019; Transport for New South Wales, 2019; LA Metro, 2019

cities to get bus lanes on the ground and put pressure on Boston to consider bus lanes.

- Matching the type of bus lane to the corridor requires consideration of physical space and political realities. Peak-hour bus lanes are best suited to travel corridors with ample street parking, while dedicated bus lanes allow for greater bus priority but also require more enforcement and infrastructure. Seattle expanded the hours of its Interbay peak-hour lanes after surveying riders. Boston’s Columbus Avenue center-running bus lane saves peak-hour riders four to eight minutes per trip, but cost \$10 million to construct.
- Automated bus lane enforcement through cameras is a low-cost strategy and avoids interactions between police and people. Bus lane design that prevents drivers from parking or driving in the lane, also known as self-enforcing design, should also be considered. Sydney has used automated enforcement for almost a decade, along with bus lanes that are offset from the curb to leave room for street parking.

Conclusions

Los Angeles advocates and transit agency staff should consider implementing more tactical bus lane projects as

the lanes offer benefits in a short timeline for low capital costs, while also serving as data- and input-gathering forums. In attempting to turn tactical projects into permanent lanes, advocates can take pilot data and find a policy champion within the City of Los Angeles or LA Metro that will petition for implementation.

Alternatively, advocates can learn from Boston in diffusing policy from the outside in by encouraging supportive, smaller cities around Los Angeles to implement tactical projects.

Lane design should accommodate a given corridor’s physical and political contexts and enforcement needs. Automated enforcement can provide advantages over patrolled enforcement, but additional research is required on the racial disparities and privacy impacts of automated enforcement.

As Los Angeles navigates its transit future, bus riders should be rewarded for their resiliency with fast, frequent, and reliable service. Bus lanes might not convince drivers to abandon their cars, but they do prioritize bus riders, which can boost loyalty and retain ridership. The working-class, immigrant, and BIPOC bus riders of Los Angeles should be prioritized in transit projects as they are the lifeblood of the system.



Liu, K. (2023). Life in the bus lane: Best practices for envisioning a better LA (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3p17j577>