

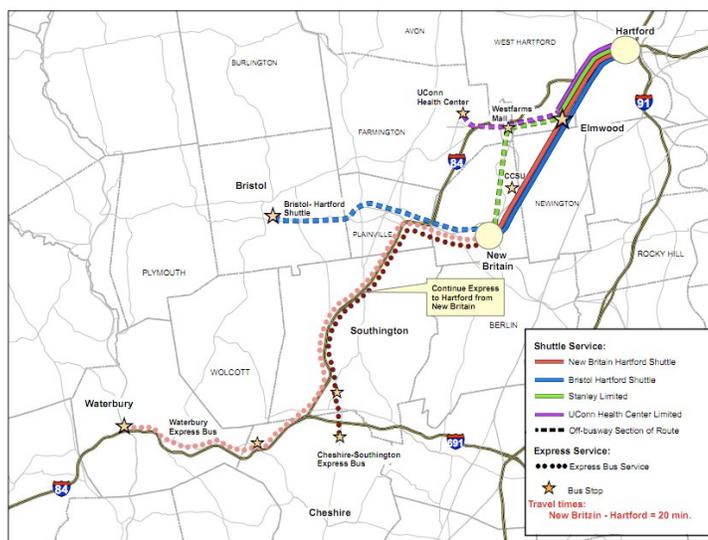


## What We Can Learn From City Busways

ERIC JAFFE DEC 20, 2011 6 COMMENTS

Late last month the Federal Transit Administration [awarded Connecticut \\$275 million](#) for a 9.4-mile busway connecting Hartford and New Britain. A busway is more or less a highway for buses; unlike the painted bus lanes found in [places like New York](#), busways are segregated roads left exclusively to bus traffic. Most experts consider such dedicated right-of-way a crucial component of successful, bona fide bus-rapid transit systems. While BRT is gaining popularity in the United States, true busways are still a rarity — particularly in major metropolitan areas.

[Hartford's proposed busway](#) has a lot going for it. The exclusive roadway will enable commuters to bypass congestion on Interstate 84. The system's 11 stations will have great connectivity with smaller bus transit lines and have an ultimate terminal connection with Amtrak at Hartford's Union Station. The Hartford system will also have all the other [hallmarks of great BRT](#) [PDF]: off-board fare collection, elevated boarding platforms and signal priority at intersections with auto traffic. When it opens in 2014, the line is expected to carry 16,000 passengers a day, and buses will make the trip from New Britain into Hartford in 20 minutes — down from up to 52 with current service. As Yonah Freemark at the [Transport Politic](#) writes: "The project fulfills all of the technical requirements for a world-class BRT network."



That's not to say there aren't some objections to the plan. The system is expensive; the federal grant won't cover even half of the total \$567 million cost. The terminal at Union Station in Hartford doesn't quite reach into the downtown area. While Hartford is small enough to walk, an extension into the core of the city would be preferred. (And Hartford's station itself isn't much to behold; during one visit a couple years back I saw signs for the "tracks," plural, only to find a single operational one.) The busway will also be built along an abandoned railroad corridor that many groups, including the Sierra Club, would prefer to see converted into light rail — an option that won't be possible once the busway is in place.

Still, if it's built to plan, Hartford's busway may become a model for the country. Here's a look at four other busways operating in major cities around the country.

### Silver Line (Boston)

The [Silver Line](#) has two segments. One goes from Roxbury into downtown Boston along Washington Street, while the other travels from South Station to Logan Airport. Only the latter line, known as the Waterfront system, can really be considered a busway. Even that is a bit of a stretch. Of the route's 9 miles, only about 1 moves along a completely dedicated road — most of that through a tunnel. The average speed of the line is only 14 miles per hour; that's actually *slower* than the previous system, because the buses must switch from diesel to electric before entering the tunnel. Still ridership has been high: [increasing roughly 98 percent](#) over the previous bus system

[PDF].

The passenger increase hasn't been enough to earn the Silver Line many friends. The line was incredibly expensive, costing roughly \$619 million. Many groups — again, [including the Sierra Club](#) [PDF] — lobbied then-governor Mitt Romney to shift the project to light rail. In October John C. Berg, a political science professor at Suffolk University in Boston, aired a few grievances about the Silver Line system: airport-bound buses don't all have luggage racks; the line as a whole lacks pre-board payment; police do a poor job keeping bus lanes clear.

"The community asked for light rail; they said no, but BRT is just as good," [Berg writes](#). "What the community got was neither; it's just a regular bus line with a fancy paint job." A third phase of the line, which would also travel along an underground busway, has failed to generate significant interest, given its estimated cost of [\\$2.1 billion](#).

### Orange Line (Los Angeles)

The [Orange Line](#), on the other hand, is considered one of the best BRT systems in the country. It runs 14 miles between Woodland Hills in the San Fernando Valley and North Hollywood, where it connects with the metro system for a quick ride into downtown Los Angeles. In addition to a dedicated right-of-way, the Orange Line has bicycle-pedestrian paths running beside the line. Since opening in late October of 2005, at a cost of \$324 million, [ridership has grown](#) steadily; [in the past few years](#) it's risen from about 574,000 in November 2009 to 640,000 in November 2011. A 4-mile, [\\$215 million extension](#) of the line, also along an exclusive busway, will provide a stronger link to the San Fernando Valley when it opens next summer.

Still the Orange Line has its critics. [According to a report](#) by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy [PDF], the system suffers from a decision to grant signal priority at intersections to car traffic. That's led to speeds of about 18 miles per hour, instead of 25 to 30 mph. An analysis by [Light Rail Now](#) — though clearly biased — found that ridership is about 25 percent lower than some might expect from a light rail system along the same route. With that said, light rail remains a possibility for parts of the corridor.

### Miami Busway

Since opening as an 8.3-mile line in 1997, the [Miami busway](#) has expanded to cover nearly 20 miles — now connecting Florida City to the Dadeland South Metrorail station, just a bit south of downtown. All told the system reaches 56 stations, and at Dadeland passengers can transfer to the metro system toward central Miami. (From there they can hop the [city's people mover](#) that circulates throughout the downtown area.) Ridership on the busway, which parallels U.S. Route 1, increased about 50 percent in the first year of operation and, as of 2002, was about 71 percent above the previous system on weekdays, [according to a report](#) [PDF] by the National BRT Institute.

Still the time savings aren't great. According to the same NBRTI report, buses frequently interact with car traffic; as a result they save less than 10 percent of travel time over the previous bus system. Such failures of the line have caused some officials to call for [converting the busway](#) into a shared road with high-occupancy vehicles. [Proponents of such a plan](#) include the auto-oriented Reason Foundation.

### Pittsburgh Busway

The [Pittsburgh busway](#) is the oldest BRT system in the United States — first opening in 1977. The system now covers 18.5 miles of the greater Pittsburgh area with dedicated bus-only highways. The 9-mile eastern route of the system has been a particular success. Average speeds reach 35 mph. with buses [arriving every two minutes](#) [PDF]. It's also acted as an economic stimulant: A [1996 analysis](#) found that 59 new developments, with a total value of more than \$300 million, had been built within a short walk of stations along the eastern route, since it opened in 1983.

But while the Pittsburgh system is considered a success, it also lacks several distinguishing elements of great BRT, [according to a 2004 evaluation](#) by the Breakthrough Technologies Institute [PDF].\* Those include elevated boarding platforms, advance fare collection, and light-rail style stations. The buses itself also lack a modern look. What the Pittsburgh busway lacks in amenities it makes up for with travel options for passengers: it's the only "[direct service](#)" model in the country, providing local, limited and express lines on the same busway.

*\*An earlier version of this post incorrectly stated the year and the source for this evaluation.*

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