

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. Edition — Wednesday, September 26, 2012 As of 6:21 PM EDT

The Commute of the Future

To Get Riders, Buses Try to Be More Like Trains; Skip Red Lights

By KRIS HUDSON



U.S. cities are trying to replace images of gritty bus travel with ones of sleeker train-like buses to attract a different kind of traveller. Kris Hudson has details on Lunch Break. Photo: Andrew Spear for The Wall Street Journal.

City buses that carry people to and from work each day are attempting an identity change: They want to be trains.

To woo workday commuters, Cleveland and select cities across the U.S. are trying to replace the image of the gritty, pokey, crowded bus by sending sleeker, more spacious and trainlike buses onto certain commuter routes. They are packing these buses with amenities cribbed from the handbook of other cities' commuter rail and light-rail trains.

In part, they hope to attract passengers who don't have to ride the bus to work—people who can afford to own a car and pay for gas and parking, but who will willingly hop a bus. Getting more of these "choice riders," as the public transportation industry calls them, can help fund local transportation and reduce traffic.

Building a Better Bus

How some cities are tricking out their rapid-transit systems

Most rapid-transit bus systems, especially those that allow riders to pay at the bus stop, outfit their buses with **three or four doors** for quicker loading and unloading of passengers.

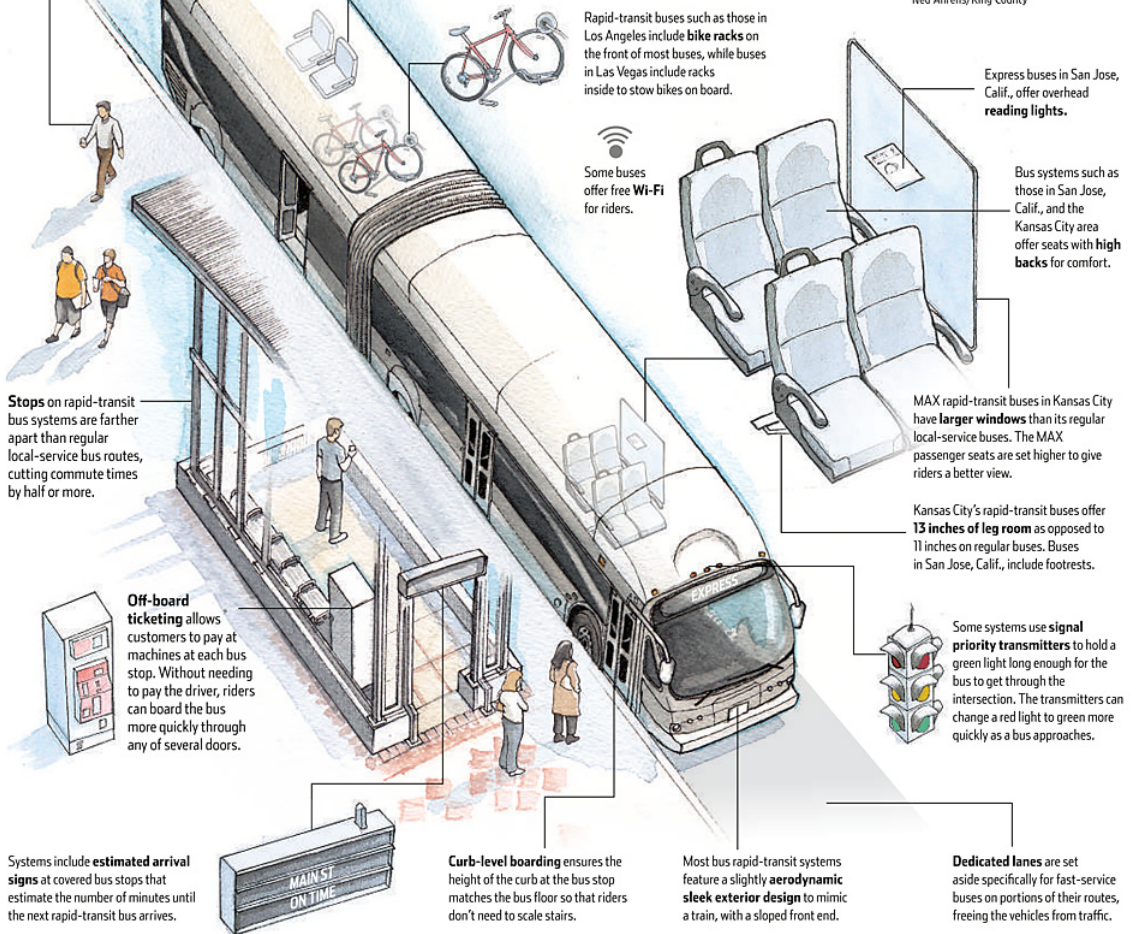
Electric-diesel hybrid systems cut emissions and noise.

Some buses include rows of **seats that face the aisle** rather than the front, providing more leg room and wider aisles.



Seattle unveiled its rapid-transit bus lines in 2010 and 2011. Their bright colors are designed to stand out from regular, local buses.

Ned Ahrens/King County



Sources: Transportation districts, Wall Street Journal research

The Wall Street Journal

The tricked-out buses promise to cut commute times by up to half from regular bus service by featuring routes with minimal stops and, in some cases, bus-only lanes to keep the vehicles from getting stuck in traffic. To further differentiate these buses from their regular brethren, many transit districts have added perks like Wi-Fi and off-bus ticketing for speedy boarding.

Cities even avoid calling the services "buses." Seattle calls its fleet "RapidRide." Kansas City's buses are emblazoned with "MAX" for "Metro Area Express." Cleveland goes by the shortened "BRT" for bus rapid transit. "It's not a bus, it's a rapid-transit vehicle," says Joseph Calabrese, chief executive and general manager of Cleveland's transportation district.



Kansas City's MAX buses have more legroom than the city's regular buses.

The National Bus Rapid Transit Institute at the University of South Florida estimates that 30 U.S. cities have adopted some form of the fast-bus service, including the Seattle area, which unveiled its first two rapid-transit lines in 2010 and 2011. The concept of rapid-transit bus service originated in crowded cities such as Bogota, Colombia, and Curitiba, Brazil, where bus systems carry millions of riders annually.

The buses' exterior designs were also inspired by trains. "The intent was to really make them look fast" and "different than the standard toaster on wheels," said David Swallow, director of engineering for Las Vegas' Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada, which operates multiple rapid-transit bus routes.

Many of the buses have downward-sloping, aerodynamic fronts mimicking a train. The vehicles' chassis often are adorned with splashy colors to set them apart from regular, local-service buses. Some, such as Cleveland's HealthLine buses, have wheel covers that blend in with the chassis to contribute to the vehicle's streamlined appearance. The buses don't have first-class tickets or quiet sections, as some trains do.



Off-board ticketing lets riders enter and exit any of several bus doors.

To better speed through intersections, fast-service buses, including those from the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, use "signal priority": A transmitter signals ahead to traffic lights to keep green lights green until the bus passes through, or to turn red lights to green as the bus approaches. Cleveland officials also pared the stops on rapid-transit service's 9.2-mile route to 36 from the 108 stops that local buses made on that route. As a result of those and other changes, the average commute time from one end of the route to the other declined to 30 minutes from 45.

To make waiting for a bus less of a head-scratcher, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority has a smartphone app that allows users to check bus schedules and determine when the next bus will arrive. The Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada's "Ride Tracker" website offers a similar service.

To speed up boarding times, riders on Cleveland's HealthLine bus service, so named because the route passes the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, buy their tickets before they get on the bus from vending machines in glass-walled enclosures at each bus stop. That way, when the bus arrives—every five minutes on average during rush hour—riders can board through any of five doors rather than slowly filing by the driver to pay. The bus' floor matches the height of the curb, so riders needn't scale steep stairs to board.



Marvin Washington rides a new-style bus in Cleveland that tries to mimic the convenience and amenities of rail lines.

On board, rapid-transit buses in Cleveland and Las Vegas include a few rows of seats facing inward to the center aisle rather than forward, allowing for more legroom and additional room to move through the bus. The Kansas City area's MAX buses, which serve both cities in Missouri and Kansas, offer two more inches of leg room than regular buses. Express buses in Santa Clara County, Calif., include Wi-Fi service, high-back chairs, footrests and overhead reading lights—essentials for attracting Silicon Valley's techie commuters.



"It speaks luxury when you look at it," said Brandi Childress, a spokeswoman for the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority in San Jose, of the bus service.

But is it enough to entice commuters to forsake their cars?

Kansas City's MAX rapid-transit service along its main route now handles about 6,000 trips daily, whereas regular, local-bus service on that route handled 3,100 trips a day.

Riders on Cleveland's HealthLine bus service can check displays at stops for delays and updates.

"The MAX bus appears to be newer and cleaner" than local buses, said Mick Goodman, a 56-year-old strategic buyer at Hallmark Cards Inc. in Kansas City, Mo., who often rides the MAX bus to work. "It definitely was faster," said Mr. Goodman. He uses the bus several times a week when his 20-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter need to use either of the family's two cars for the day.

Mr. Goodman's bus ride into work is roughly twice as long as driving—an hour as opposed to 30 minutes—because he must take a local bus most of the way before he can transfer to Kansas City's MAX rapid-transit bus. Even so, he says the bus saves him gas money, and Hallmark covers part of the cost of a monthly bus pass for employees.

Annual ridership tallies on Cleveland's HealthLine have increased by roughly 70% since the rapid-transit bus line's debut in 2008 to more than 4.4 million trips last year. In the first eight months of this year, the HealthLine had recorded more than 3 million trips.

On a recent weekday afternoon, many the riders on the HealthLine said they didn't have cars. A few, however, said they left their cars at home in favor of the bus. A one-way fare on the HealthLine costs \$2.25, and an all-day pass \$5, the same as regular-bus service.

"It's been convenient, and it comes often," Theresa Prince, a 43-year-old environmental services worker at University Hospital said as she rode a HealthLine bus from work one afternoon. "And parking is crazy at the hospital."

Cleveland and other cities hope to woo 'choice riders'—people with cars who hop a bus instead.

Still, bus advocates must overcome a significant stigma. About half—51%—of mass-transit trips in the U.S. are taken on buses, according to the American Public Transit Association. Yet, buses often are regarded as transportation mostly for the poor.

Commuter rail lines tend to work well for moving suburban, white-collar workers to jobs concentrated in a central business district. Blue-collar jobs other than factory work tend to be more diffuse, requiring a wider network of routes more accessible than rail service.

"There's more of a cachet that goes with rail because those services tend to be in better neighborhoods," said Robert Cervero, a professor of city and regional planning at the University of California at Berkeley specializing in transportation planning.

Some cities see rapid transit as a less-expensive alternative to light rail, though bus systems can't transport as many people. The Kansas City area opened a rapid-transit bus line in 2005 and a second one last year for a combined cost of \$50 million after numerous public votes to finance a light-rail system failed. Kansas City planners estimate that light-rail along the area's main, six-mile bus route would have cost at least \$250 million. Funding these bus services comes from a mix of local taxes, federal money and fares.

In Cleveland, the cost of building the HealthLine amounted to \$200 million. Transit planners estimate that installing light-rail service along the same stretch of Cleveland's Euclid Avenue corridor would cost \$1 billion.

[See video:](#)