Van Ness Avenue Bus Rapid Transit

San Francisco’s first full-featured Bus Rapid Transit project will anchor the Muni Rapid Network

The Van Ness Avenue Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project will create dedicated bus lanes along two miles of Van Ness and South Van Ness Avenues, from Lombard to Mission streets. The lanes will be used by Muni’s 49 and 47 routes and Golden Gate Transit. The transit–only lanes will flank center landscaped medians along Van Ness Avenue, physically separated from the two lanes of mixed flow traffic in each direction. All-door boarding, elimination of most left turns, transit signal priority, and traffic signal optimization will help reduce transit travel time on the corridor by up to a third. In addition, pedestrian improvements, signal upgrades, new streetlights, new landscaping, and roadway resurfacing will be implemented to improve safety and aesthetics.

Van Ness BRT is a signature project of the SFCTA’s Prop K transportation sales tax program, and is the culmination of years of multi-agency collaboration at the local, state, and federal level to improve transit along this part of U.S. Highway 101. The project received environmental approvals in 2013 from the Transportation Authority Board, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Board, and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and project traffic approval in 2014 from Caltrans. Since that time, the SFMTA has managed project implementation and construction. Construction began in October 2016. With over $36 million of Prop K helping to fund the project, and the Transportation Authority continues to provide project support and oversight to ensure environmental compliance and efficient implementation.

What is BRT?

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a globally-proven and comparatively inexpensive way to make bus service as fast, reliable, and comfortable as light rail. BRT systems typically combine transit-dedicated street lanes and bus signal priority to shorten time between stops, along with platforms and vehicles designed for speedy passenger boarding to reduce time spent at stops. High quality stations with safe, easy walking access are also included to improve passenger comfort getting to and from the BRT.
BRT Features

- **DEDICATED BUS LANE** separated from regular traffic to improve transit performance.
- **ALL-DOOR, LOW-FLOOR BOARDING, AND PROOF OF PAYMENT** to allow buses to pick up and drop off passengers more quickly.
- **HIGH QUALITY SHELTERS** including protection from the elements and comfortable seating.
- **PEDESTRIAN SAFETY ENHANCEMENTS** including reduced crossing distances on streets where BRT stations exist and large platforms for waiting passengers.
- **TRANSIT SIGNAL PRIORITY** with traffic signals recognizing an approaching BRT vehicle and extending the green light when it is safe to do so.
- **TRAFFIC SIGNAL OPTIMIZATION**, a data-driven approach to timing all traffic lights in the corridor.

Van Ness BRT Station Locations

**BRT Station**

*NOTE: Routes 47 and 49 would continue north and south of the Bus Rapid Transit corridor.*
Why will Van Ness have Bus Lanes in the Center?

The biggest advantage of center-running transit lanes is the separation of buses from all other traffic. Currently, buses are delayed by other vehicles parking and making right turns. Buses also have trouble pulling into and out of bus stops when there is traffic or illegally parked cars. Right-side bus lanes reduce these conflicts, but separated, center transit lanes remove these conflicts entirely, preserving reliable bus service with short travel times even when other lanes are congested.

Construction Updates

The core BRT project will be built in conjunction with several separately-funded utility replacement projects as a unified Van Ness Improvement Project. Sewer, water, and emergency firefighting mains will be installed, replacing pipes that are over 100 years old in some places. The combined project will also upgrade street lighting, traffic signals, and the power supply for trolley buses. “Green Infrastructure”—special rain gardens to allow stormwater to seep into the ground rather than the sewer system—will be installed in key spots, complementing the 210 new median trees and other landscaping included in the BRT project.

The SFMTA is using a delivery method called “Construction Manager-General Contractor,” or CMGC. The CMGC method allows selection of a contractor based on a combination of experience and price. Walsh Construction was selected and brought into the project during the design phase to provide their expertise in planning the construction sequencing and management of traffic. Major construction of the unified Van Ness Improvement Project is expected to take 30 months; a significant savings over the time it would take to build the utility projects one at a time. CMGC method will also limit cost growth and change orders during construction through a negotiated guaranteed maximum price that will allow shifting of some risks to the contractor. Construction began in October 2016.
A Brief Transportation History of Van Ness Avenue

Development was slow along Van Ness until the 1906 Earthquake, when businesses and residents fled a devastated downtown. Redevelopment of Civic Center and the need to move throngs of visitors to the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in the Marina also fueled development along the avenue, which included a new Municipal Railway line.

A nascent auto industry and its array of support sectors found a home as businesses moved back to a rebuilt downtown, and the Van Ness corridor quickly became one of the west’s largest Auto Rows.

After the Golden Gate Bridge united San Francisco with points north, Van Ness Avenue and Lombard Street became integral auto corridors carrying US 101 and the burgeoning local and regional commercial, commuter, and recreational travel. Van Ness was widened in 1936 and extended south to Howard Street to connect with the southern portion of the city and the Peninsula.

Post-war highway planning saw the removal of rail lines, which were paved over for use by motor buses. The H Line, running up Van Ness since the 1915 Exposition, was abandoned in 1950. But in the late ’50s citizen protest against proposed freeways throughout the city led the Board of Supervisors to halt construction on most of them, and Van Ness was left as the main conduit for US 101.

By the ’70s, Auto Row had fallen into decline. In the late ’80s, the Planning Commission adopted the Van Ness Area Plan, which called for an increased mixed-use and residential character—which is now being realized—and encouraged tree-planting on the street, echoing the boulevard plans of the late nineteenth century.

Starting in the mid ’90s, long range transportation plans prepared by the Authority and Muni recognized Van Ness Avenue as one of the city’s top transit corridors in need of rapid service. Prop K, passed by 73% of San Francisco voters in 2003, provided the local funds that led to investment in Bus Rapid Transit on Van Ness Avenue. Planning and environmental approvals took place in 2013, and construction began in 2016. By 2020, transit passengers will experience the reduced travel times, reliable frequencies, and passenger improvements offered by BRT.