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**Highlights**

Highlights of [GAO-03-729T](#), a testimony before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

## Why GAO Did This Study

Buses form the backbone of the nation's mass transit systems. About 58 percent of all mass transit users take the bus, and even in many cities with extensive rail systems, more people ride the bus than take the train. In recent years, innovative Bus Rapid Transit systems have gained attention as an option for transit agencies to meet their mass transit needs. These systems are designed to provide major improvements in the speed, reliability, and quality of bus service through barrier-separated busways (see photo), high-occupancy vehicle lanes, or reserved lanes or other enhancements on arterial streets.

The characteristics of Bus Rapid Transit systems vary considerably, but may include (1) improved physical facilities or specialized structures such as dedicated rights-of-way; (2) operating differences such as fewer stops and higher speeds; (3) new equipment such as more advanced, quieter, and cleaner buses; and (4) new technologies such as more efficient traffic signalization and real-time information systems.

This testimony, which updates a report GAO issued in September 2001, provides (1) information on federal support for Bus Rapid Transit systems and (2) an overview of factors affecting the selection of Bus Rapid Transit as a mass transit option.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-729T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-729T).

To view the full testimony click on the link above. For more information, contact Kate Siggerud, (202) 512-2834, [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

## FEDERAL TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION

# Bus Rapid Transit Offers Communities a Flexible Mass Transit Option

## What GAO Found

Federal grants are available for Bus Rapid Transit projects, primarily through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) New Starts program. However, only one project currently has a funding commitment since few Bus Rapid Transit projects are ready to compete for funding, competition for New Starts funding is intense, and certain types of Bus Rapid Transit projects are not eligible for New Starts funding because the program provides grants only for projects that operate on a separate right-of-way for the exclusive use of mass transit and high-occupancy vehicles. FTA is proposing to change this requirement so that more Bus Rapid Transit projects can be eligible for New Starts funding. In addition, constraints on the use or size of the other federal grants may limit their usefulness for Bus Rapid Transit projects. Under a demonstration program that began in 1999, FTA awarded \$50,000 to each of 10 grantees for projects designed to help determine the extent to which Bus Rapid Transit can increase ridership, improve efficiency, and provide high-quality service. FTA plans to evaluate the demonstration projects to determine their most effective elements.

When selecting a mass transit system, communities consider its capital and operating costs, performance, and other advantages and disadvantages. In the cities that GAO reviewed, the per-mile capital costs of Bus Rapid Transit varied with the type of system—averaging \$13.5 million for busways, \$9.0 million for buses on high-occupancy vehicle lanes, and \$680,000 for buses on city streets—and compared favorably with the per-mile capital costs of Light Rail. In the cities that GAO reviewed with both Bus Rapid Transit and Light Rail service, neither type of service had a consistent advantage in terms of operating costs, and Bus Rapid Transit was comparable to Light Rail in terms of ridership and operating speed. A major advantage of Bus Rapid Transit is its flexibility: buses can be rerouted to accommodate changing traffic patterns and can operate on busways, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, and city arterial streets. However, the public may view Bus Rapid Transit as less likely than Light Rail to improve a community's image and spur economic development.

### Bus Rapid Transit Service on a Barrier-Separated Busway



Source: Transportation Research Board.