

SPEEDY SALVATION OR 'DAGGER IN THE HEART OF CHICAGO'?

Former CDOT expert wrote 10-page letter to CTA about 'ill-conceived' plan

BY ROSALIND ROSSI
Transportation Reporter

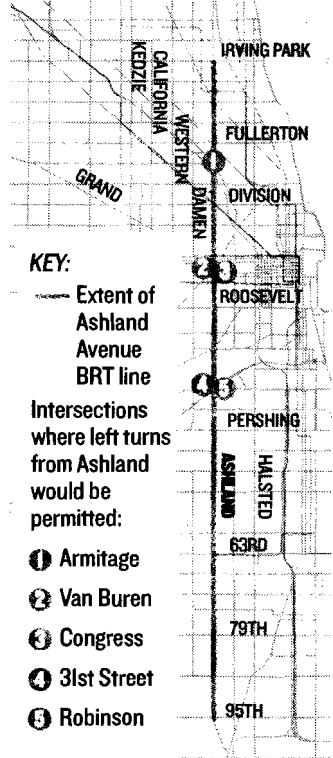
A former city traffic expert says a plan to run a dedicated bus lane down the center of Ashland Avenue for 16 miles is "ill-conceived" and nothing like eight other bus rapid transit systems touted as models of success.

Tom Kaeser is the first traffic guru to publicly break ranks with the city and swim against the tide of official and not-for-profit advocates who have been pushing the potential benefits of a \$160 million Ashland Bus Rapid Transit.

Kaeser, 64, worked for the Chicago Department of Transportation for 30 years before retiring in 2003 as assistant chief engineer in the department of traffic engineering. Then, he said, he spent six years as a consultant, including to CDOT.

But now, Kaeser said, he is completely retired, and "nobody can say, 'Cut off his contract.' I am not renewing my professional licenses. I am 100 percent retired. My life's work was trying to make things work on the city's street system, and here's something I think is not going to help at all. It's just going to be counterproductive."

ASHLAND BRT PLAN



Tom Kaeser of Chicago, a retired city traffic engineer, stands in the middle of Ashland Avenue south of Irving Park on Friday. Kaeser is against the CTA's plan to turn Ashland into a bus rapid transit system. | MICHAEL JARECKI/FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

Sun-Times

Kaesar aired his deep concerns about the Ashland BRT plan in a detailed 10-page letter to the Chicago Transit Authority submitted during an official comment period that ended Dec. 20.

But before he did that, Kaeser told the Chicago Sun-Times, he waded through some 2,000 pages of online and paper documents, including appendices to appendices in the mountainous, legally required environmental assessment for the Ashland BRT.

He also scoured the streets of the world using Google maps and official websites to examine eight touted bus rapid transit case studies — in Brazil, Cleveland, Eugene, Ore., Los Angeles and New York City.

What he discovered is that none of those systems is similar to what Chicago officials announced for Ashland Avenue, he said. Under the CTA plan, cars, trucks and the regular No. 9 Ashland Avenue bus would be relegated to one lane of traffic in each direction for almost all of 16 miles, from Irving Park to 95th Street, with only a handful of left turns directly onto expressway ramps allowed.

"I couldn't find anything that was very close to Ashland at all," Kaeser said. "In city after city it seemed to be that way."

Most other systems have at least twice as much lane capacity for regular traffic on their BRT street, or within one block of it, Kaeser said.

The closest street with at least four lanes running parallel to Ashland is a half-mile to 1 mile away, leading some residents to fear a "carmageddon" of vehicles pouring through adjacent side streets to make three right turns because they cannot turn left off Ashland. Retailers worry that customers frustrated by traffic will go elsewhere and delivery trucks will be delayed.

Kaeser tends to agree. He called the CTA's plan so "ill-conceived" that it "could be a dagger in the heart of Chicago."

"Everybody says in these other cities they never had any traffic

problems, even though naysayers said there would be," Kaeser said. "Well, they are not like Chicago."

World-renowned Chicago grid

CTA officials say their proposal is a work in progress, and more left turns may be added. Another option is to let the No. 9 bus travel in the center-running transit lane and stop at center boarding stations, a CTA spokeswoman said.

However, those adjustments were not reflected in calculations that predicted BRT buses would travel at 15.9 mph during the peak of each rush hour. That's 83 percent faster than the 8.7 mph of the current No. 9 Ashland bus — the city's busiest — during that same time.

Shrinking auto lanes to accommodate a BRT would only knock 2.5 mph off current car speeds, bringing them to 12.8 mph during rush-hour peak, the environmental assessment predicted.

An Ashland BRT, with its traffic-signal priority and stops every half-mile, could serve 1 in 4 households within walking distance that do not have a car, advocates say.

CTA officials are putting their faith in Chicago's street grid system to absorb a projected 35 percent of traffic diverted from Ashland to north-south arterial streets, from Kedzie to Halsted.

"Chicago's grid system is renowned throughout the world for its ability to handle diversion," CTA spokesman Brian Steele said.

Kaeser doesn't buy it.

Chicago's grid may handle diversion well downtown, where another BRT is proposed, Kaeser said. There, drivers can reroute to a major arterial just a block or two away. But the closest parallel four-lane street for the 16 miles of Ashland under discussion is Western, a mile a way. Damen, a half-mile away, has two lanes in each direction for only about 1.5 miles parallel to the project, he said.

He questioned the traffic model used to make projections, saying some counts of current traffic volumes are unrealistic, so how could

the model reliably make predictions?

"They use their modeling process and say the traffic will all spread out; no one will see the difference. I challenge that," Kaeser said. "Their analysis left something to be desired."

Buses over cars?

CTA officials have compared the Ashland BRT to a relatively new one on New York's Webster Street, which also has only one lane in each direction for non-bus traffic. But Webster has half the daily traffic volume of Ashland, operates on the right side of the road, and allows 51 left turns over 5.4 miles. In addition, regular New York buses run in the same bus lane as the BRT, something CTA did not initially propose but now is considering.

Peter Skosey, of the Metropolitan Planning Council, cautioned that the latest Ashland plans are a mere "broad brush" still subject to fine-tuning. The key point is to lure more people out of cars and into buses, he said.

"If we can double the number of people riding on the Ashland bus, that's a lot more people moving up and down Ashland," Skosey said.

"This isn't just about the cars that are going to be inconvenienced, but it's about all the people who are going to be inconvenienced by riding the bus. The focus is too much on the cars and not enough on the bus riders."

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VIDEO AT SUNTIMES.COM

Retired traffic engineer Tom Kaeser shares his concerns about the Ashland Avenue bus rapid transit plan.

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Tom Kaeser, former Chicago Department of Transportation employee

BRT: COMPARING CHICAGO'S PLANS WITH EXISTING SYSTEMS

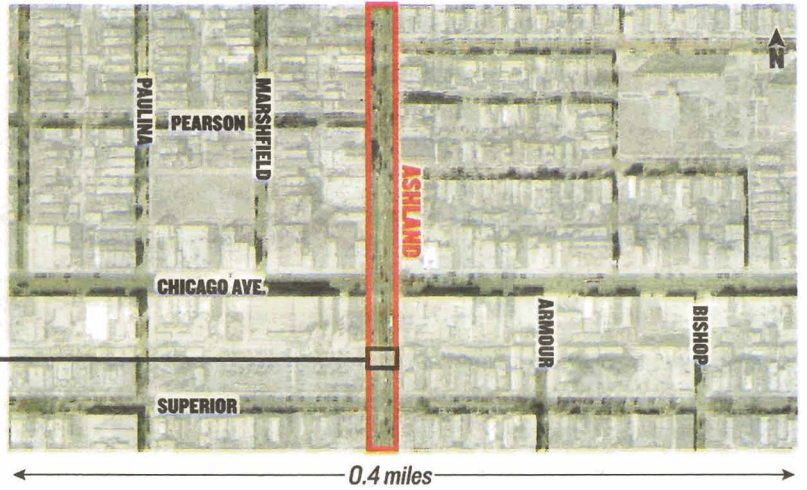
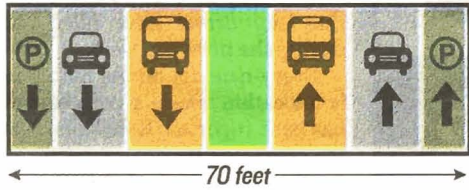
An analysis of two existing BRT systems, one in Cleveland and one in Eugene, Ore., reveals some significant design differences when compared with Chicago's plan for 16 miles of Ashland Avenue. In Cleveland, where much of the line configuration is similar to Chicago's plan, high-capacity alternatives exist in close proximity to the route. In Eugene, the route is along roads with multiple traffic lanes to alleviate congestion.

NOTE: All maps and configuration diagrams are in scale with each other

CHICAGO (proposed)

LOCATION: Ashland Avenue, currently with four lanes of traffic, is surrounded primarily by dense residential and business land use, such as this stretch near Chicago Avenue. The closest north-south routes are small local streets with 1-2 lanes of traffic.

BRT STREET: Buses travel along a center median where passengers board. There is one lane of traffic and one lane of parking on either side.



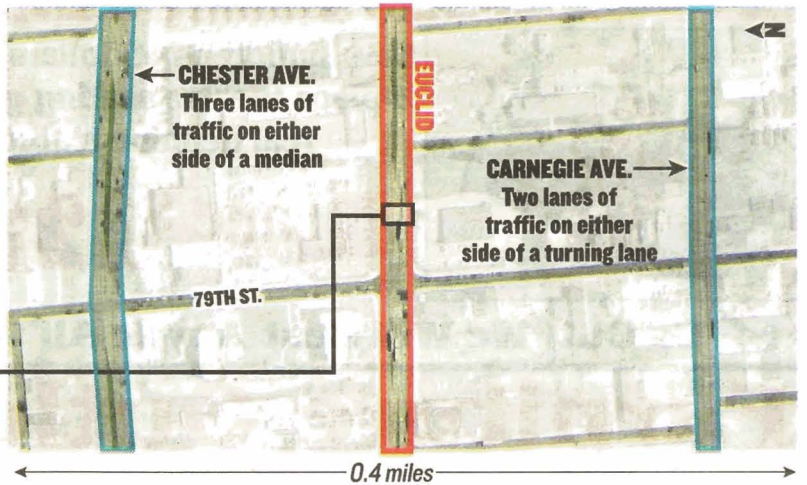
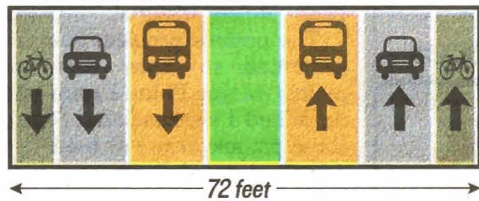
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Peter Skosey, Metropolitan Planning Council

CLEVELAND

LOCATION: Euclid Avenue stretches from downtown to the northeast area. This typical stretch near the Cleveland Clinic hospital has two major thoroughfares on either side.

BRT STREET: The configuration changes, but in this example, buses travel along a center median where passengers board. There is one lane of traffic and one bike lane on either side.



EUGENE, ORE.

LOCATION: Runs primarily along the very wide Franklin Avenue in Eugene, then to downtown Springfield where it runs along the similarly wide Pioneer Avenue and other major thoroughfares.

BRT STREET: It changes, but in this example near downtown Eugene, buses travel on dedicated bus lanes adjacent to a center median. There are three lanes of traffic on either side.

