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CTA to double speed of some downtown buses that crawl at 3 mph

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A new CTA project hopes to clear Loop traffic so bus trips take less time. (Terrence Antonio James, Chicago Tribune)

'Loop Link' is the city's solution to traffic that slows buses downtown.

A long-awaited project designed to more than double the 3-mph average speed of CTA buses traveling across the middle of downtown will be called Loop Link, and construction of bus-only lanes and rapid transit-style boarding stations is set to begin in two weeks, city officials were set to announce Monday.

The roughly 2-mile bus rapid transit area will serve Washington, Madison, Clinton and Canal streets and will debut late this year, when the bulk of the \$31.8 million construction project is completed, Chicago Department of Transportation officials said.



Work on the overall project, however, will stretch into next year and result in temporary lane reductions, according to CDOT. Those will start March 16, on portions of Madison and Clinton, followed by Washington and Canal and Jackson Boulevard in the spring, and on Randolph Street starting in late summer.

A parallel goal involves reorganizing downtown streets so that all users, whether on foot or bicycle or behind the wheel, have their own space, officials said.

For its part, the CTA's Loop Link service is aimed at significantly faster times for bus trips of roughly a mile or so through the congested downtown for more than 21,000 commuters each weekday, including thousands of Metra riders who connect to CTA buses at Union Station, Ogilvie Transportation Center and other Metra stations.

"One of the reasons I hate winter is my CTA bus trip to the office in the morning and to the train at night. It's excruciatingly slow, and the constant stop-and-go makes my neck hurt," said Bonnie Fuller, of Elmhurst, who said she makes the 40-minute bus trip in less than half the time — and more enjoyably — by riding a Divvy bicycle in warmer weather between Ogilvie and her workplace in Streeterville.

At stake with Loop Link is whether bus rapid transit catches on in Chicago. Beyond the roughly 18 months of construction, general traffic on several Loop streets will permanently lose at least one lane to buses operating on the dedicated 24-hour bus lanes.

"The central Loop BRT (bus rapid transit) has got to come out of the box as something that people are impressed with and that they can really feel the change. And not only bus riders, but also motorists and others who today face a kind of chaotic mess on downtown streets," said Peter Skosey, executive vice president at the Metropolitan Planning Council and an advocate of the project.

The Emanuel administration's plans to launch bus rapid transit on Ashland Avenue, a program that would reduce street parking and eliminate left-hand turns, has already made some Chicago residents wary of the broader idea.

The downtown bus rapid transit experiment will follow a small-scale effort, called the Jeffery Jump, introduced in late 2012 along Jeffery Boulevard on the South Side.

The No. J14 Jeffery Jump and other CTA buses slow to average speeds of 3 mph — walking speed — when they enter Loop traffic gridlock, a problem that the Loop Link project is expected to address, officials said.

City officials expressed confidence that everybody stands to gain from a better organized street layout. They say Loop Link will result in more efficient travel downtown for bus riders, that pedestrians will feel safer crossing streets, drivers will find it easier to make left and right turns, and bicyclists will have new, protected bike lanes on Washington, Randolph and Clinton streets.

"This is about modernizing the overall experience of these downtown corridors to accommodate more people and move them more quickly," said Chicago Transportation Commissioner Rebekah Scheinfeld, who is scheduled to present Loop Link during a speech to the City Club of Chicago on Monday.

"We are cutting right at the heart of congestion that has plagued the Loop for decades," Scheinfeld said.

Although Loop Link branding will be centered in the downtown area, where buses carry almost half of all people traveling in vehicles, the impact of the changes is not limited to the central business district, officials said. The improvements are expected to have a ripple effect, reducing bus-bunching and gaps in service in all the neighborhoods that the buses serve, officials said.

"We expect to see better bus service in Pilsen and Little Village on the No. 60. You are going to see better bus service in Austin on the No. 20, better bus service on the South Side on the No. J14," said Carole Morey, CTA chief planning officer.

Unlike Jeffery Jump buses, which are wrapped in a blue livery, other buses that enter the Loop Link zone will be identified in the buses' LED route signs with the phrase "via Loop Link" after their route designations, officials said.

Loop Link, whose construction contract was awarded to Capitol Cement Co. of Chicago, represents the most ambitious attempt to date to introduce bus rapid transit in the central business district of a major U.S. city, according to independent transportation experts.

But the same experts, who advocate widespread use of bus rapid transit as a cost-effective alternative to building more rail lines in urban areas, also expressed some disappointment that Loop Link will not, at least initially, be more daring by incorporating all elements of BRT.

For example, requiring passengers to pay their fares before boarding buses, similar to the process at rail stations, is a cornerstone of bus rapid transit. It's aimed at minimizing the time buses are standing still. But the CTA plans to require fare prepayment at only one of eight bus stations that will be located on Madison and Washington streets between Wacker Drive and Michigan Avenue.

"Obviously there are concerns about fare evasion that we need to work through," Morey said. The station on Madison at Dearborn Street will test pre-paid boarding, possibly by installing turnstiles, and the seven other stations can be retrofitted with off-board fare payment later, Morey said.

In addition, the design of the steel-and-glass bus stations, while featuring an arching 90-foot-long canopy, falls short of an earlier concept that was more weather-proof. An artist rendering provided by CDOT appears to show people, including women wearing tank tops and shorts, waiting at a BRT station on a summer night — hardly the blizzard conditions

that test a commuter's commitment to using mass transit instead of driving or riding in a taxi.

Business owners complained that a more enclosed bus station design would create obstructions and block sight lines to stores and other retail establishments, Scheinfeld said. Another concern is how strictly Chicago police and city traffic-control aides will enforce drivers' compliance to stay out of the bus-only lanes.

Automated camera enforcement is used successfully in some cities where bus rapid transit operates, but Chicago officials decided against camera enforcement, saying the red concrete that will mark the bus-only lanes, along with signs, should be adequate. Violators are subject to a \$90 fine under city ordinance.

A hallmark of bus rapid transit involves green lights that extend a few extra seconds for buses near intersections, especially if the buses are running behind schedule. But the system cannot be used in Loop Link because it would gum up traffic on cross-streets and other parallel streets, Scheinfeld said. Instead, CDOT will use a queue-jump system that gives buses stopped at an intersection an early green light to get ahead of other traffic and avoid conflicts with vehicles that are turning right at the next block, she said.

Experts who advise cities to strive to achieve the highest level of bus rapid transit service — by adding as many of the bells and whistles as possible — predicted good results from Loop Link, although they would have liked to see more elements included.

"I would say it will have benefits because Chicago is making a tremendous improvement to the streets and the bus routes that will use the infrastructure," said Annie Weinstock, a regional director for the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, which has established a global standard for bus rapid transit design.

"But it doesn't quite get there," she added.

"There is more they could have done to really make a splash. In a city where there has already been a lot of criticism about BRT, you really need to do as much as possible to show the public what BRT could be," Weinstock said.

If the Ashland Avenue bus rapid transit line is ever built, it should be connected to the Loop Link, Weinstock said.

CTA officials hope to eventually build a bus rapid transit network consisting of numerous routes to improve access to jobs and give Chicago an advantage over other Midwestern cities for tourism, residents and businesses.

The city has committed to spend a total of about \$150 million on Loop Link and other transit enhancements in the downtown area.

One of those other projects is a bus transit center on what is currently a parking lot south of Jackson Boulevard at Union Station. CDOT is set to announce Monday that it has awarded a \$20.1 million contract to FH Paschen Construction Co. to build the facility starting in April. The bus terminal will provide an off-street staging point for CTA buses that currently contribute to traffic tie-ups on Canal. The total cost of the transit center, including land acquisition and design, is estimated at \$41.5 million, according to CDOT.

On the CTA Loop "L" structure, meanwhile, CDOT is preparing to start demolition of the Madison/Wabash station on March 16, officials said. Wabash will be closed to vehicle traffic between Washington and Madison starting March 9, officials said, adding that all businesses and sidewalks on Wabash will remain accessible during the 18-month project. The estimated \$75 million project also will eliminate the Randolph/Wabash station and replace the two outdated stations with a larger station at Washington/Wabash.