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BRT to LRT conversion challenges (RaiseTheHammer)

On [2 January 2019](#) By [Long Branch Mike](#) In [Industry News](#), [Trams/Streetcars/LRT](#)

Ottawa is in the middle of a conversion away from a very successful Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network known by its marketing name, The Transitway, towards a Light Rail Transit Network known as the O-Train. The remaining BRT System will feed the LRT system and act as rapid transit in areas too low in passenger levels to have LRT. This article looks at the trials and tribulations that come with this process.

For most situations, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is generally cheaper to build than Light Rail Transit (LRT). However, it's not that much cheaper if you do it right and build actual BRT, not BRT-Lite. BRT Lite is generally express buses operating in mostly mixed traffic, some painted bus lanes, some preemptive intersection signal control and nice bus stops. This often gets called BRT by politicians trying to build rapid transit without spending much money.

Unfortunately, most of the time, the amount of money you spend on any rapid transit system is directionally proportional to the positive passenger increases you get out of it. One of the key issues with BRT is that you are forced to spend a lot more money to continuously upgrade the BRT right of way as passenger levels grow.

LRT systems and their rights of way often start up with a much higher level of segregation and heavier infrastructure, so an LRT operation's positive effects are bigger and more immediately felt. They also can handle much higher levels of passenger growth before you have to spend more money on increasing the passenger carrying capacity of the existing infrastructure.

The main "BRT trap" is the quest for cheap rapid transit by politicians who are unwilling to understand and properly implement transit operating technology like a BRT network. Politicians like to believe you can start off spending very little on infrastructure and slowly improve it as passenger levels grow. BRT can start off this way but very quickly, increasingly expensive BRT infrastructure upgrades and quickly rising operating costs begin to tax the entire transit system. In fact, at a certain point, BRT stations and their rights of way have to become larger and more robust than rail infrastructure, just to carry the same number of passengers as a rail-based system. This realization was one of several key breaking points for Ottawa and it's political BRT supporters.

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