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CATA Suspends Bus Rapid Transit Plan ^[1]

Thursday, April 20, 2017, 12:45 am

By:

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CATA's board voted yesterday to suspend its plans for the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) that had been proposed to replace the #1 bus line. One of the main reasons given by CATA is President Donald Trump's plan to end funding to the program that would have helped pay for the BRT.

But the project, which would have significantly impacted East Lansing's downtown, became more controversial locally over the last year. It was meant to replace the #1 bus route with dedicated buses running in dedicated bus-only lanes with fewer stops, from the Lansing state capitol to the Meridian Mall, and was going to cost over \$130 million, mostly in federal dollars.

In East Lansing, the plan ^[2] had been to reduce westbound car traffic along Grand River Avenue

in downtown to two lanes, dedicating the third lane to the BRT. To manage eastbound car traffic, which currently has only two lanes, CATA was going to repurpose numerous sections of the green median along Grand River Avenue downtown.

Drivers traveling eastbound would have had far fewer opportunities to turn left into East Lansing's downtown, had the plan gone through. This was causing concerns among East Lansing's downtown business community.

MSU officials had also repeatedly said [3] they were concerned about pedestrians' ability to cross Grand River Avenue to get to downtown safely. CATA would have needed some land from MSU to get the project done, which means it needed MSU's cooperation.

Farther west, along Michigan Avenue in East Lansing from Harrison Road to Frandor, CATA was going to remove the existing dedicated bike lanes and move bicycles to the median. Bicycle advocates had questioned [4] this and the lack of bicycle accommodation in other parts of the plan.

The plan to remove many mature trees from East Lansing's medians was also a source of consternation, although CATA said they would replace trees with trees their engineers said would be better suited to the remaining medians.

Citizens of Meridian Township had become locked in open debate about the plan, with the Township Board ultimately voting against [5] the plan. The vote was symbolic, because the roads that would have been involved are controlled by Lansing and the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). But politically speaking, the vote mattered to CATA's chances and public image.

The Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce also voted against the plan [6], again symbolically, but also significantly, as it indicated a lack of support from the business community. (The current East Lansing City Council withdrew the City [7] from the Chamber of Commerce in protest after the Chamber deployed attack ads in the last East Lansing City Council election.)

Without support from MSU, Meridian Township, and the Chamber of Commerce, CATA's chances at the federal funding at the core of the project were probably getting lower even if a Democratic president had taken office.

East Lansing's City Council had not taken a formal vote on the plan, but some opponents had been pushing Council [8] to do so. CATA had made presentations [9] in East Lansing to try to address concerns about the project. The Planning Commission had been trying to understand how two new major projects proposed for East Lansing's downtown—in the Park District [10] and Center City District [11]—would interact with the BRT.

CATA's #1 bus route is its busiest, but in preparing to end the BRT project, CATA acknowledged [12] that ridership on the route is down from previous levels.

In East Lansing, CATA's buses along the north-south route of Abbot Road are most often full, as students ride from the northern tier apartment complexes down to MSU and back. CATA has said there is no simple way to solve that problem, given the narrowness of Abbot Road on its southern end, where it meets Grand River Avenue. This is the area where the two big redevelopment

proposals could mean significantly more car, bike and pedestrian traffic.

Note: This article was originally published on April 16, in advance of the vote, and was updated on April 20 after the vote.

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