

South Bay Rapid bus opens with limited service through early 2019



South Bay Rapid limited bus, route Rapid 225, between the East Palomar Street Transit Station and downtown San Diego that began Sept. 4, 2018. (Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune)

South Bay Rapid bus service connecting downtown San Diego to eastern [Chula Vista](#), and eventually to the border crossing in Otay Mesa, opened Tuesday — a significant boost for the public-transit system as outlined in the region's often-divisive blueprint for mobility.

The now-opened bus line, dubbed the 225 Rapid, provides a transit service specifically aimed at communities in eastern Chula Vista. The route takes commuters between Santa Fe Depot and East Palomar Station, located at the entrance to Interstate 805, in roughly 30 minutes depending on traffic.

“The benefit to me is that I’m saving money on gas and wear and tear,” Mitchell Martha, 37, said before boarding the new bus Tuesday morning.

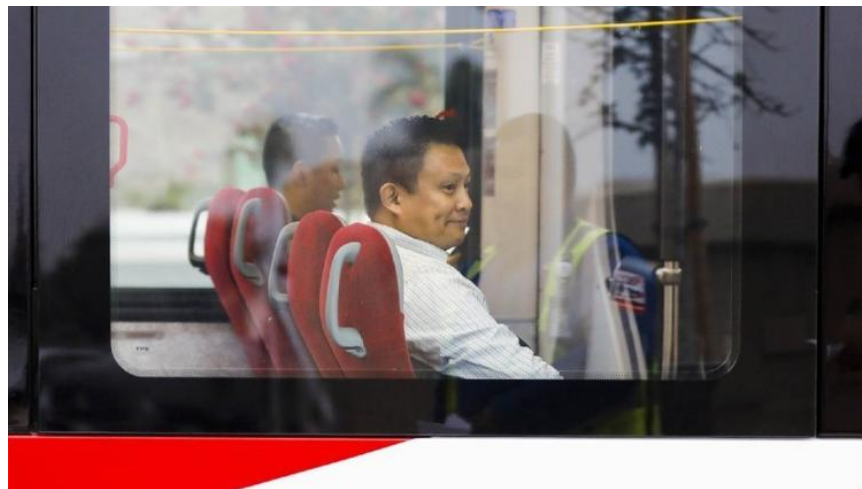
Martha said he usually drives from his home in Eastlake, Chula Vista, to Balboa Park, where he leaves his car and walks into downtown. But he said he'd gladly take the bus if it doesn't add any time to his commute.

"It needs to at least be the same, break even," he said. "If this takes me any longer, and it's more inconvenient then I'm not going to do it. I'm just trying it out."

The entire 26-mile Rapid bus line is expected to be completed by January and will including a dozen stops from downtown to a new Otay Mesa Transit Center at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The project includes a nearly six-mile-long, transit-only lane in the median of East Palomar Street and along Eastlake Parkway, including a bridge over state Route 125.

The stations will be equipped with shelters and digital displays providing real-time arrival information. Rapid buses are scheduled to arrive every 15 minutes during peak hours and every 30 minutes during non-peak times.



A rider looks out the window of a Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) South Bay Rapid limited bus, route Rapid 225, as it leaves the East Palomar Street Transit Station for downtown San Diego. (Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-

Tribune)

Transportation officials said the new line was specifically designed around transit-oriented developments, such as the new 210-acre mixed-use development Millenia located just east of SR 125.

Karina Galarza had been driving from her home in Otay Ranch — which will eventually have its own Rapid bus stop — to the trolley in downtown Chula Vista before commuting into San Diego.

On Tuesday, the 35-year-old happily drove to the Palomar Station's dedicated parking lot to catch the new bus instead.

“The fact that I don't have to drive all the way to the trolley is a big plus,” she said. “This is a nicer environment, nicer ride.”

The entire project is expected to cost \$128 million, including about \$15 million for 16 new buses.

Funded by the region's half-cent sales tax, Transnet, the project is part of the San Diego Association of Governments' long-range transportation plan.

For years, environmental groups have maintained that SANDAG has enabled sprawling development by prioritizing freeway projects. The agency has found itself in court numerous times in recent years over whether it's accurately disclosing the greenhouse gas impacts of its planned transportation system.

SANDAG officials have routinely said they are delivering on the agency's primary goal to provide a wide range of transportation alternatives.

“As a member of the SANDAG board of directors, our goal is to provide mobility choices for our region's citizens,” Chula Vista Mayor Mary Salas said Tuesday at a press event for the bus route.

“This new route provides commuters with important alternatives to travel to downtown San Diego and other regional destinations and employment

centers, and makes transit more available to all Chula Vista residents,” she added.

The regional Rapid bus service — which connects residential areas, such as in Escondido and Rancho Bernardo, to job centers with limited stops — have been hailed as a major success by the agency and its 21-member board of elected officials from around the county. Rapid buses have seen increased patronage in recent years, even as overall transit ridership has declined in line with national trends.

In 2015, SANDAG officials proposed building freeway connectors between state Route 94 and interstates 15 and 805 to improve commute times on Rapid buses.

Environmental justice advocates quickly pushed back on the roughly \$600 million project, which could have caused considerable disruption to nearby neighborhoods by adding elevated ramps along the SR 94 from the I-805 into Sherman Heights.

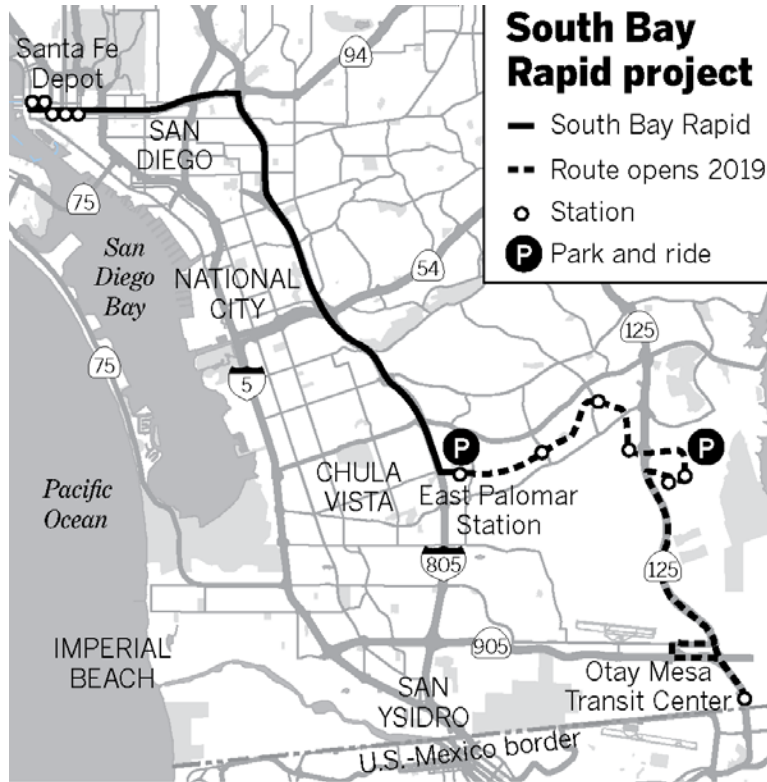
Activists called for a project alternative that would have instead converted existing lanes or the freeway shoulder to carpool and transit use. The project was shelved when a consensus couldn't be reached.

Now SANDAG said it plans to build dedicated bus lanes along the shoulders of SR 94 and I-805 by fall 2019 to service Rapid buses. The pilot project would run for three years and need legislative approval to be made permanent.

The project, however, doesn't replace the need for the previously envisioned freeway connectors, said Jennifer Williamson, a senior transportation planner with SANDAG.

“I would not say that a shoulder project on 94, 805 is going to be in any way as good as having two (transit) lanes from 805 to 94,” she said. “It's a good interim solution, but I don't think it's a final solution.”

Until the South Bay Rapid project is completed, service will run on a limited schedule from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays only. Rides are free through Friday, Sept. 7.



Sources: maps4news; keepsandiegomoving.com

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